

GUNS AND ROSES

By

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Abstract

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When I started this journey in 2019, I never could have imagined that gun violence would have risen to the level it has risen to today, possibly as a result of a worldwide pandemic. What I did know is that this is an important issue that affects our families, our communities, and even the churches that we serve. As a result, my challenge would be to the clergy to do more in reference to the violence that occurs outside their four doors. At first, my challenge was to the Baptist Clergy, however, I decided to broaden it to clergy all over the United States and beyond.

I built the dissertation around what I called AAA (Awareness, Assessment, and Action). Awareness of the plague of gun violence through preaching, teaching, social media avenues, clergy gun violence summits, and community events i.e., marches, prayer vigils. Assessment done by clergy as to what they have or don't have in reference to ministries to address gun violence, and lastly, a commitment to action by clergy to implement and build ministries to address gun violence.

The results of the survey indicated that there is a great need on behalf of clergy to create ministries and do more concerning the gun violence. Those that completed the two question survey expressed great interest to do more where God has planted them in a call to action which gives us hope; however, low response in completing the survey can indicate either a lack of interest or perhaps a busyness to the point of being unable to commit to the fight against gun violence. Whatever the reason, the degree in which we see gun violence is taking its toll; clergy's apathy or lackadaisicalness will no longer be

an option, faith without works will no longer be an option as God will force the prophets' hands as with Jonah to go, cry, and preach until guns are no longer an option.

This dissertation, ***Guns And Roses***, is dedicated to the memories Vlahna Roberts and Jaquan Smith, whose lives also reflect the youth and young adults whose lives were taken too soon by gun violence. My prayer is that in this writing and though the actions of clergy who move towards making our communities a safer place to play, to learn, and to grow that they realize that the lives of their love ones were not in vain. May God comfort them from day to day....amen!

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INTRODUCTION

Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:17).

Growing up in Harlem in the seventies and eighties as my mother's only child, I realized the importance of survival. It was my mother who gave me the tools that I would need: education being the first, church being the second, and lastly, programs in the community that would help keep me out of trouble, such as the Boy Scouts. I thank God for this foundation; however, even with all this in place, I oftentimes wondered—due to the homicide rate of young African American males, gang violence, and police brutality—if I'd make it past thirty

Academics would lead to careers in the Social Services field, such as Case Worker within the Bureau of Child Welfare, a Probation Officer with the Juvenile Intensive Supervision Program, Supervisor of Young Men's Program, and presently a Teacher's Aide position in a Juvenile Facility (JCCA) school in Pleasantville, NY.

My spiritual calling would transition me from the choir as a teenager to becoming a Deacon, Youth Minister, and Assistant Pastor of the Antioch Baptist Church to my present role as Senior Pastor of the New Tabernacle Baptist Church. Having achieved all of this I could not resist the voice, the tug, the pull of God toward something more.

I enrolled in New York Theological Seminary in 2000 and graduated with my Master of Professional Studies in 2007. During this season I interned with the seminary in its Uth-Turn program which molded and trained me and other students in how to work

with at-risk youth. Uth-Turn helped me develop the skills to relate and minister to at-risk youth both inside and outside of the church. Yet I still felt the pull of God toward something more!

During the first five years of pastoring the New Tabernacle Baptist Church, I set up a program for the youth entitled “Check Urself Before You Wreck Urself” which was designed to give the youth both a spiritual and recreational foundation. I invited former NBA players, news anchors, rappers, and authors to mentor the young people, and in addition one of my parishioners, who at the time was an NYPD Police Officer, conducted workshops that dealt with how to respond if one is stopped and questioned by a police officer. I wanted the young people to have a strong Youth and Young Adult Ministry in which I benefitted from growing up. I helped build the program at Antioch Baptist Church along with my wife as the Youth Minister. Yet again, God what more are you calling me to?

An awakening would happen in June and September 2018 that would shake me to the core. The deaths of two of our young people at the hands of gun violence, a seventeen-year-old African American female, and a twenty-one-year-old African American male, in less than three months’ time. I preached the eulogy for both, but to my and the church’s shame had nothing in place to deal with the families after the fact. I resolved to do something to keep alive the memories of every youth that died prematurely or way too soon, for every “Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted” (Jeremiah 31:15 NIV). Something to bring comfort to the families, honor their children’s memories, and hopefully help curb the needless gun violence that our children succumb to from day to day. No, I have to do something, the church has to do

something, the churches across the United States of America, no matter the faith or denomination, have to do something! God, could it be, is it, it must be the “more” that you are calling me to.

I enrolled in New York Theological Seminary’s DMin Program as a Powell Fellow in September 2018. I was a member of the first cohort in memory of Adam Clayton Powell Jr., which certainly is an honor and a privilege. I knew without a doubt what my action dissertation project would address: the need for the church to create and develop ministries to address the gun violence that occurs daily outside of the churches’ front doors. Ministries that will address the traumas of gun violence through counseling, workshops that will bring youth and young adults together to discuss solutions and alternatives to gun violence, and the sermons necessary to address gun violence before it happens and when it happens. Although my dissertation project challenges Baptist pastors and Baptist churches, the curriculum that will be developed will be used worldwide. The curriculum will offer churches a blueprint to start and build upon in order to address gun violence. It will give our youth a choice of the sword rather than the gun.

If Powell were with us today, his challenge would be to the pastors and churches to do more about the gun violence within our communities, and he would have written a Powell Amendment, legislature making it harder to purchase guns, mandated state and local background checks, and fines along with imprisonment for illegal gun sales by dealers and gun traffickers. Rev. Dr. Adam Clayton Powell would have brought, taught, and used the sword. The sword that would create lifelong opportunities for young people and bring comfort in the midst of suffering. The sword that would show churches how to advocate for gun reform and collaborate with other churches, nonprofits, and government

agencies to get illegal guns off the streets. Powell would have brought the sword of the Spirit to churches, communities, and government. The sword of the Spirit, the only offensive and defensive weapon that was and is essential to my survival.

CHAPTER 1 NEW TABERNACLE BAPTIST CHURCH

I am currently the pastor at New Tabernacle Baptist Church, Bronx NY. The mother church of New Tabernacle Baptist Church is Tabernacle Baptist Church in Charleston, SC. The late Reverend Grover Cleveland Williams, who labored in the Tabernacle Baptist Church, migrated to New York City about 1950. In March 1952, the late Reverend G. C. Williams organized the New Tabernacle Baptist Church. The small church was located on 16th Street, New York, N.Y. Although the church was formed in 1952, the Certificate of Incorporation, pursuant to Article 7 of the NY Religious Corporation Law, was not accomplished until June 25, 1954.

The church continued to grow and needed more space. From 1957-1959 the church moved to a larger building located at 1094 Washington Avenue, Bronx, New York. After the Lord called Reverend G. C. Williams home, Reverend Hayes became the pastor for a short duration. At the conclusion of the first major turmoil for this young church, Reverend Henry Bolden became the pastor. On or about 1968/1969, the church experienced another major turmoil in the form of a major fire, which caused extensive damage. The Lord blessed us to be able to conduct service in another building located on Washington Avenue near 167th Street, Bronx, NY.

A few years after recovering from the fire and at the height of another major turmoil, Reverend Henry Bolden moved on to become the pastor of another church. For several months, the New Tabernacle Baptist Church was without a pastor. Attendance

and membership dwindled during this time frame. In July 1970, Reverend James B. Staggers became the fourth pastor of NTBC. The church began to grow again.

In October 1980, the church relocated to its current location at 990 East 181st. Street, Bronx, N.Y. Pastor Staggers' legacy is embedded in our street address which has now been officially renamed "Reverend James B. Staggers Place."

The church is now certified under 501c3, which benefits the church membership and local community in many ways. Some of the community outreach programs initiated since the relocation to the current address are the clothing program for the community and a weekly food pantry program.

Most, if not all, of those who started out on this journey together and many who came aboard later have been called home by the Lord. In God's wise providence, the late Pastor, Reverend James B. Staggers was called from labor to reward in September 2008. The church glorifies God for the successful leadership that Reverend Staggers provided during his tenure as pastor for thirty-eight years. Surely this includes his wife, Leading Lady Emeritus, Mother Daisy Staggers. The church is thankful to God for the efforts of Reverend Staggers and those before and after him for their contributions to the stability of NTBC.

A major highlight of Reverend Staggers' leadership was for New Tabernacle to always pray together, stay together, and wait on the Lord. In obedience, by adhering to such wise council and being without a pastor for two and one-half years, I was declared the Pastor of the New Tabernacle Baptist. My wife, Leading Lady Mrs. Maria-Antoinette Ratliff, brings her own talents and gifts to the ministry.

Although I became the Pastor-elect on March 20, 2011, I wasn't installed as the Senior Pastor until Sunday, October 13, 2011, becoming the fifth Pastor of New Tabernacle. Through my leadership and motivational skills to develop the church to be the best it can be, I have planted and nurtured the seeds of recognition, acknowledgment, reward and encouragement throughout the year among kindergarten, elementary, junior high, high school, college and post-graduate students.

Since becoming Pastor, I have worked along with the congregants to build a bridge between church and community. The following have been done:

- A yearly Community Outreach Day in August served more than 1,500 people annually with the distribution of free food, Bibles and clothing for the entire family; provided health screenings; registered voters; and hosted arts and crafts and outdoor fun for children of all ages.
- Annual Community Safety Meetings where free smoke and carbon monoxide detectors were distributed; people were registered to work the polls for upcoming elections; and safety issues regarding the seniors and the West Farms community were discussed.
- Free hot and cold breakfasts are served every Sunday morning for the Youth Sunday School.
- Established new ministries: Social Services Ministry; Health Care Ministry; a Chaplaincy Ministry which added nine New York State certified chaplains; Media Ministry; and the Glorious 4 Quartet Group.
- Created church logo and theme, "Where God's Light Shines all the Time" (see Appendix B).

- Worked closely with community political leaders: Councilman Ruben Diaz Sr.; Bronx President Ruben Diaz Jr.; Senator Luis Sepulveda; Councilwoman Karines Reyes; and Councilman Ritchie Torres, to get grants and necessary information to help with community and church programs.
- Hosted annual recognition of academic achievement of students of all ages who have been promoted to a new level in school
- Revamped the weekly Bible study to encourage people to study the Word of God
- Established Friday Night Flavor services to keep the saints of NTBC spiritually encouraged during the year
- Established a Leadership Conference that will teach members of NTBC to become effective and viable leaders for the 21st century church

The New Tabernacle Church family has worked feverishly to do Christian ministry in a declining fiscal picture. Through various successful fundraisers and faithful giving by the loyal and dedicated members of this ministry, New Tabernacle was able to: re-carpet the entire sanctuary with brand-new and top-of-the-line commercial carpeting, reupholster the pews and the pulpit furniture, and purchase new TV screens for the newly created Media Ministry. “With God, all things are possible.”

The New Tabernacle Baptist Church is a Baptist church under the United Missionary Baptist Church Inc. and the National Baptist Conventions. The church has approximately 150 to 200 members on the roll and hosts about 125 members from Sunday to Sunday. Approximately 90% of the congregation is African American with southern roots; the other 10% are of Hispanic and Caribbean descent. Approximately 90% of the membership do not live in the immediate vicinity, and travel across the Bronx

and Manhattan to get to the church. Approximately 60-70% of the congregants are over fifty years of age and 5-10% are under twenty.

The community is plagued with a high poverty rate, but as a result of gentrification new housing and businesses are being planted. Despite the positive changes in the community, gang violence, shootings, and drug dealing are still prevalent.

The leadership/ministries consist of the Pastor, Associate Ministers, Deacons' Ministry, Deaconesses' Ministry, Trustees' Ministry, Missionaries' Ministry, Ushers' Ministry, Nurses' Ministry, Men's/Women's Ministries, Chaplains' Ministry, Clerical staff, Culinary staff, Pastor's Aide Ministry, and Youth Ministry. There are four choirs: Male Chorus, Youth Choir, Voices of New Tabernacle, and Praise Team. Worship leadership is divided: on first Sunday the Associate Ministers lead and carry out worship with the Voices of New Tabernacle rendering music; on 2nd Sunday the Chaplains are in charge of worship and the Praise Team ministers in song; on 3rd Sunday the Deacons and Deaconesses are in charge of carrying out worship with the Voices of New Tabernacle rendering music; 4th Sunday is Youth/Young Adult Sunday and the children are in charge of the worship, singing, scripture, prayers, etc.; and every fifth Sunday during the year the men lead worship and the Male Chorus is in charge of the singing. It is through this diversity that people become more involved in worship as participators and not spectators.

The Associate Ministers assist me in carrying out the worship service through prayer and reading of scriptures. Each Associate uses their own gifts; for example, one Associate is also Choir Director, and another Associate runs and operates the Youth Ministry. The Deacons and Deaconesses assist me in carrying out the worship during a

devotional period prior to the beginning of service. Deacons and Deaconesses also assist in visitation of the sick and in serving Communion. The Deacons are a part of the Official Board of the church. The Trustee's oversee the collection of offerings, deposits in accounts, writing of church checks—including salaries—and based on the needs of the ministry. Although the trustees are a part of the Official Board, they answer to the requests of the Pastor and the Deacons, acting in the best interest of the church.

The Clerical Ministry is responsible for the printing and reading of the bulletin on Sunday morning. The Clerical Ministry is also responsible for communication during the week concerning special services, members that take ill, and other important notices. The Culinary Ministry is in charge of the purchasing and cooking of events between Church services that include anniversaries and repasts. The Missionaries' Ministry assists with the preparation of the new members when they join as candidates for baptism. They also aide in the ministry of the visitation of the sick.

The Nurses' Ministry is trained in CPR and serve the pulpit with water, juice, and towels as needed. The Nurses' Ministry also assists anyone who may become physically ill within the service. The Usher's Ministry distributes programs, escorts people to seats, and assists in taking up the missions offering. The Ushers are the watchmen and watchwomen on the walls in helping to keep order within the services. The Pastor's Aide Ministry helps raise money for the Pastor during the year to assist and defray the costs of the use of a vehicle in visitation of the sick, cleaning of robes, vacation leave, sabbaticals, educational materials/academia to name a few.

The Men's/Women's Ministries host different services and outings during the year to raise money for specific church projects. They host services such as prayer

breakfast (Men's) and retreats (Women's) in which proceeds go toward church renovations. The Youth Ministry raises money during the year to provide for both recreational and spiritual activities. The money raised goes toward trips in the summer, educational scholarships, and spiritual retreats provided through UMBA.

All ministries have their own annual day during the year in which services are celebrated in the afternoon. This creates fellowships with other Baptist churches. The church also fellowships with other Baptist churches for their annual celebrations within various ministries, and for the most part these are standard engagements.

Presidents are voted into office every two years, and the church has a strong tradition of members voting and deciding what they want as opposed to allowing the Pastor to lead and make decisions. The Board consists of the Pastor, Deacons, and Trustees. I meet monthly with the Board and host an annual Vision Meeting in which church business is discussed, e.g., finance, the navigation of the ministry, sharing of vision between Pastor and people, and people and Pastor.

The New Tabernacle Baptist Church is one of over 100 churches that make up the United Missionary Baptist Association which includes Harlem, the Bronx, and part of Westchester County. The United Missionary Baptist Association began on October 25, 1955 as a merger of three organizations that included the General Baptist Association, the Progressive Baptist Association, and the Manhattan, Bronx, Westchester, and Staten Island Associations (MBWSIA). These three merged in an effort to become a formal member of the State Baptist commonly known as the Empire Baptist Convention of New York Inc. These three local Baptist organizations whose objectives were similar in

missions and education felt that they would be stronger together and that an alliance was necessary to carry out their goals.

The initial call meeting for their amalgamation was held at Southern Baptist Church, 12-16 West 108th Street, Manhattan, Dr. C. B. Wilson, Pastor. This was the first meeting of any Baptist organization at the church. Representing the three associations were the Rev. J.A. Polite, President of the General Baptist Association and Ms. Eva S. Bonaparte, President of the Women's Auxiliary, the Rev. E. M. Moore, President of the Progressive Baptist Association and Ms. Lillie M. Gibson, President of the Women's Auxiliary, the Rev. Dr. O. Clay Maxwell, Jr., Moderator of the Manhattan, Bronx, Westchester, and Staten Island Association and Ida M. Townes, President of its Women's Auxiliary.

Dr. A. L. Hughes was voted as the Presider over the session after a period of devotion and Rev. Walter Harding was voted as the Recording Secretary. Dr. Hughes spoke concerning the importance of the merger in doing the Lord's work along with a brief account of the status of Baptists in New York. Suggestions were then taken for a name of the organization and it was unanimously voted on and agreed that the organization would call itself United Baptist Missionary Association (UMA). The session concluded with the Rev. Dr. O. Clay Maxwell Jr., Pastor of the Baptist Temple, Manhattan as its first Moderator. On April 11, 1957, the Association became legally incorporated as the United Missionary Baptist Association Inc. (UMBA). It is known as the United Missionary Baptist Association of New York and Vicinity and its Auxiliaries, Inc.

Presently, UMBA has approximately 114 active churches. Its sessions are held quarterly, and are hosted in turn by participating churches with the annual session being held in October. Officers are elected every year at the Annual Session and can serve four years consecutively; terms commence the following January to coincide with the fiscal year of the Association. The current Moderator is the Rev. Dr. Anthony Lowe, Senior Pastor of the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, Bronx NY.

In spite of the histories of these two organizations (New Tabernacle Baptist Church and United Missionary Baptist Church), along with the ministries that they offer, it is my conclusion that not enough has been or is being done about gun violence, and the murder, particularly of the youth, that occurs outside of the four walls of each and every church. In 2018, I had to eulogize two young people whose families were a part of my congregation. Less than six months apart, they were both victims of gun violence and died at the hands of two other young people. One was a seventeen year old African American female, Vahlana Roberts, who had dreams of being a ballplayer, and the other was a twenty-one year old African American male, Ja'Quan Smith, who also loved basketball, had dreams of becoming a successful businessman and had graduated from St. Raymond's High School only two years before. As a result of these two young deaths, I decided that I had to try and do something, not only to keep their memories alive, but, hopefully, also to prevent the type of pain and suffering I witnessed from happening to other families in the future.

I began my work with the Robert's family in trying to fight for justice by locating her daughter's killer and then attempting to set up a scholarship fund in her memory. I met with the family, politicians, and local officials until the perpetrator was caught and is

currently on trial. I also met with the N.Y. Yankees to try to set up scholarships in their memories, but to no avail. Thus, I have been led by the Spirit of God to work with preachers and pastors to develop a curriculum of ministries that will deal with the gun violence that occurs outside their doors daily and the communities that are affected by it.

My mission has been to make the communities safer and give our youth a fighting chance to fulfill their dreams. I have already spoken with pastors, both young and old, from UMBA, along with the Moderator of the UMBA, Dr. Lowe, who are excited and on board concerning the project.

CHAPTER 2

PASTORING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

The telephone rang again right before 9:00 am; “Oh no Lord who and what now?” I answered it with the same reluctance and fears I had the day before. The church clerk confirmed my fears; another member had passed, another member called home. “My God when will it end?”

Pastoring in my ninth year, neither I nor any of my colleagues have ever encountered a season of death in such proportions. Church members, pastors, pastors’ wives, church leaders, young and old, family members; Covid-19 would not discriminate. For a pastor, death can be and is almost always shocking, catching us off guard when it happens, nothing new. But the degree and magnitude of death during Covid was new, one after another. Whoever coined the phrase “when it rains it pours” hit the nail on the head.

The pandemic caused the shutdown of restaurants, colleges, public school systems, nonprofits, businesses, and, yes, even churches. In this new situation, how does one encourage the flock and keep them together? As Pastor of the New Tabernacle Baptist Church, the question I faced with many pastors all over the United States was how does one pastor a church in the midst of a pandemic? How does one still pastor when you lose member after member after member, an ongoing cycle in which even funerals or homegoing services aren’t the same? What virtual sermons do you preach? How does one keep the congregation together and encouraged?

Aside from pastoring the church is the critical issue of caring for one's own family who are also subject to the virus which poses a health threat day to day. Yet, I have done services for those who lost loved ones to the virus both in churches and funerals homes in an effort to provide a little relief to the families by giving their loved ones a decent burial. I have cared for and am still caring for family members, such as parents, in-laws, and spouses. I gave weekly tele-worship where I meet with the congregants via telephone conference and we have forty-five minutes to an hour of service. The order of service is a word of prayer; scripture that showers from everyone, from one line up to three verses; an Inspirational Word; announcements; prayer and benediction. Sunday is our hour of Faith, Hope, and Power from 12:00-1:00 pm which takes place through Facebook Live and is inclusive of scripture, prayer, singing by our Praise Team, the sermon, prayer and the benediction. The service is seen by not only our members but other church members, and people all over the world. I have also hosted a virtual concert and been able to celebrate at least two anniversaries through Facebook Live. We begin with about 100 views, but once it is shared, the average increases to about 2,000 views by the end of the week. Another service the church has offered is a midweek, midday, 15-minute worship and fellowship lunchtime praise break. Every Wednesday at 12:00 pm we ask our members to stop what they are doing and get on a conference call where we have prayer, scripture, and a five-minute Inspirational Word. What is unique about this 15-minute express service is that anyone who shares in this fellowship is welcomed to do the prayer, scripture, or Inspirational Word. Volunteers are asked for the week before, and are not limited to officers of the church. This express service started out with four or five and has now grown to between twenty and twenty-

five. Pastors, including myself, have had to come up with creative ways to do ministry through technology, even as it relates to giving, Churches, including ours, have established links, such as but not limited to CashApp, Zelle, and Venmo. This all came through the use of social media and much prayer; to God be the glory!

I cannot fathom why God would allow such devastation by the virus. At best, I can surmise that either God is perturbed at humankind or wants to get our attention, for this could very well be the last days and we are seeing Revelation unfolding before our eyes; however, this would only be speculation because, as I preached on one Sunday, “God doesn’t let us know everything God is up to no matter how great we think our relationship is with the Highest.” But here is the lesson for the church, plain and simple: you do not have to be inside of the physical edifice to worship God! Wherever you are, individually or collectively, is where the church is. It should not have been a new revelation, but for many it was. In John 2:19, Jesus said concerning His temple, His body, that if they tear it down, He would raise it up in three days. Some who heard it missed it and thought He was referring to the tabernacle that they stared at in awe. Nope sorry, God is a Spirit and they that worship must worship in spirit and in truth...no building required, just a body! The pandemic has taught us how to really worship God, how we ought to treat each other, how to stop taking things for granted and what really matters, no more church as usual...yes, the pandemic has opened our eyes to so much that if we learn these lessons, not only will we make it through this season, but we will leave a legacy for the generations that follow us!

I Know a Change Is Going to Come (January 2020-Present)

I am presently on the cusp of my Pastoral Anniversary, as I will have celebrated ten years of pastoring on October 24, 2021. Needless to say, this year has been wrought

with unforeseen trials and tribulations that have stretched me in ways that I have never been stretched before. In my professional career as a teacher's aide, I have had to adapt to virtual learning, to social distancing with masks in the classroom, to morning temperature checks, and now to weekly Covid-19 testing.

In the same way, the dynamics of assembling for worship has also changed with mask wearing, social distancing, temperature checks, written attendance, hand sanitizers throughout the sanctuary, and limited gatherings for in-house worship. In January 2021, the church began opening its doors for worship, but limiting it to between twenty and twenty-five parishioners and requesting that people call during the week in order to not exceed the maximum set in place. The order of worship and the timeframe remained the same, and, for the most part, the parishioners were pleased that service moved quickly and they were not in church for long periods of time as was the case prior to the pandemic. Congregants who wished to attend service in the building but exceeded the allotted worship spaces were able to choose another Sunday within the month as an alternative. Despite the limitation, however, the worship rarely exceeded the maximum allowed and at times even fell short of the twenty to twenty-five.

Although people across the United States were getting vaccinated, church attendance was still at an all-time low. Attendance on social media (Facebook) remained consistent, with an average of seventy to eighty online during the service. The online church does not only consist of parishioners from New Tabernacle, but also includes those from various places, states, churches, and even those who are looking for a new relationship with God, a church family, or a nice worship experience. I believe that part of the reason why attendance was not consistent was people being afraid of catching the

virus, for some claimed that they were not coming back until the church was “professionally cleaned” to Covid-19 standards. In May 2021, the church, after spending almost \$2,000 to be professionally clean, increased the number of those that could attend from twenty-five to thirty-five. Unfortunately, this action did not change the number of parishioners who returned in person. The change came, however, in June 2021 when I decided to go to outdoor monthly services at least once a month from June to October. The outdoor services were able to host fifty to sixty-five people, including those within the community, with the same worship format. The church, through outdoor worship, was able to witness to the online church, the present congregation, and the community. God opened up another door or avenue to reach a broader audience. The church was able to witness outside her doors, and shared this information through flyers on social media. Being outdoors allotted the church opportunities to bless the community through two clothes drives which were done on Saturdays in July and September, and a food drive which was done in April in collaboration with a local politician, Council Member Vanessa Gibson. Through the food drive, the church and Council Member Gibson were able to bless between 200 and 250 people in the West Farms area with gourmet meals. The outdoor services offered the church opportunities for creative ministry. For instance, on August 8, 2021 I declared the Sunday outing a day of healing. The church collaborated with VIP Services in the Bronx, NY during its midday worship to provide vaccinations for Covid-19, HIV/AIDs and Hepatitis-C to the church and the community. Vaccinations were offered before, during, and after the worship service. The sermon of that day, “It’s Time To Walk Into Your New Season” was taken from John 5:1-9. In it I spoke about the man at the pool of Bethesda and the need to rise up, putting one’s faith

into action by making moves. The service ended in prayer and a healing testimony of one of our parishioners who is a HIV/AIDs advocate.

Presently, I have three Associates, one male, and two females. One of my Associates transitioned the year before the pandemic (November 2019) and was the spouse of one of my female Associates. Every fifth Sunday for the past three years, I have set aside this Sunday for my Associates to preach a platform service on a certain theme that I chose, and I joined with them in the teaching/preaching experience. When I had scheduled an outdoor service that fell on a fifth Sunday, they were allotted an opportunity to bring forth a Word.

On Sunday, August 29, 2021 my Associate Ministers, along with me, engaged in a platform service outside the church doors and the theme was “Signs of the Times: On the Highway to Heaven.” Each Minister was asked to take a road sign, match it with a scripture, and preach/teach on it. The Associates focused on the following signs — One Way, Stop, Go, and Rest Stop Ahead. The purpose of this theme was to be used as an evangelism tool to draw the community and to encourage the body of Christ, and to God be the glory as it did both! The church on that Sunday also broke out the grill and fed those in attendance with hotdogs, hamburgers, and French fries.

The month of June 2021 brought about another change in the way Bible study was being conducted. Bible study was moved to Zoom on Wednesday night with an average attendance of approximately twenty parishioners. On October 1, 2021 the church hosted its first Friday night Flay-va service via Zoom in which we invite a guest pastor to preach along with his/her congregation. This is a full service with praise/worship, scripture, prayer, introduction of the preacher, sermon, invitation to discipleship, offering, and

benediction. This service occurs the Friday night before every first Sunday, and affords the church a chance to fellowship with a sister church inside of the Zoom room.

On Sunday, October 10, 2010, the church was set aside for the installation of two Deaconesses during our noonday service. The two Deaconesses were in training for quite some time and were catechized from May till October 2021. During the service, they were examined and questioned about their call and conversion, Baptist polity, the attributes of God, the Articles of Faith, and more. This was the first time I had the opportunity to organize such a sacred service, which was not only viewed by the church but also by the world through social media. In the Baptist faith, the installation of such officers is taken seriously and can also be seen as two services in one. The Acts of Consecration occurs immediately after examination, preaching, and the offertory appeal. Candidates and church are given charges, Bible(s) and hymnal(s) are presented to candidates, prayer of consecration is given, right hand of fellowship administered, and certificates are issued, making it official.

I am the Second Vice President of the Baptist Evening Ministers Conference of Greater New York and Vicinity. The Conference meets on Monday night via telephone conference and occasionally on Zoom if there is a special service. The Conference has not returned to meeting in person and is unsure about the right time to return to in-person gatherings. As the Second Vice President, I have hosted services, such as a memorial service for those that transition that were a part of BEMC (Baptist Evening Ministers Conference) in October 2021; a Gun Violence Summit via Zoom in August 2021; and a Dr. King Day Service in January 2021. The United Missionary Baptist Association has also done its quarterly gatherings via Zoom and faces the same challenge of when and

how to meet in person. These auxiliaries also face fiscal challenges due to the pandemic and although there are ways to give to these organizations, people, for whatever reasons, do not feel an obligation despite repeated appeals to give. The churches have been hit hard for similar reasons making it difficult to operate and do ministry.

One of the reasons I know that God called me to the pastorship of the New Tabernacle Baptist Church was because the church was still mourning the transition of the late Pastor James B. Staggers at the beginning of my tenure. The church unveiled the street naming the month before I was to begin as Pastor-elect but still mourned the Pastor's death after close to three years. Coming from Antioch Baptist Church, in Harlem NY, organized by the late Dr. Alfloyd Alston, I knew what it was like to have a pastoral transition. I could certainly relate and empathize with the church that was still mourning, so one of the highlights for me was to come up with the following motto, "Where God Lights Shine All The Time" based on John 1:1-8, and then had a logo designed based on the motto. My purpose for the motto and logo was to assist in building a church spiritually and increasing her morale, teaching congregants to walk as light at all times, and to be proud of the calling of discipleship and servanthood. The church designed t-shirts and polo shirts in multiple colors and saw an increase in demand over the summer as the church instituted outdoor worship. The parishioners proudly sported their t-shirts and polo shirts, and the dress code changed from dressy to casual. We started with one t-shirt in 2012, changed the design in 2014, and gravitated to polo shirts based on the logo design in 2015.

Through it all, the Lord has opened up doors for the church to not only stay connected but also to do ministry. This has entailed "thinking outside of the box" or the

church in which we found ourselves worshipping and fellowshiping but without effective ministry. Thus, a change has come!

I could not do this without the good disciples and Christians of the New Tabernacle Baptist Church, and certainly not without my wife who prays for me and runs our social service media, designs our flyers, does our programs, and is the Chair of the Deaconess ministry of the church.

CHAPTER 3 MORE GUNS THAN PEOPLE

There are more guns in the United States than there are people, which means that we have enough to arm every citizen and stranger with a gun and still have weapons leftover. Due to their availability or easy access, guns can, have, and will end up in the wrong hands. Pastors sooner or later will have to bury a child, teen, young, middle aged, or elder due to gun violence which plagues our communities from the urban setting to the suburbs. As I have indicated, I have had to bury two teens out of New Tabernacle Baptist Church due to gun violence, and I have witnessed the conviction of one of my parishioners who took it upon himself to purchase an illegal handgun, and slay another young black male as the result of an unpaid drug debt. The family members continue to serve the church as he serves a sentence of forty years to life. This systemic evil is one that will not go away anytime soon and pastors must confront it sooner rather than later. There has to be an awakening of the church, particularly the Baptist churches, to face the issue, address the issue, and move toward solutions in ministries that will abate the problem commonly known as gun violence.

I believe that gun violence is a systemic evil, and that changes are needed to laws that allow easy access to guns. Additionally, programs must be developed that will keep our youth from getting involved with gangs, economic opportunities that will open doors for those in need of decent wages to provide for their families. If change is going to occur there has to be collaborative efforts made between Church, government, law

enforcement, and community; but it begins with the Church. Gun violence has plagued out communities to the point that nowhere is safe, for mass shootings have played out in schools, churches, concerts, dance clubs, places of employments, baseball fields, playgrounds, movie theaters, shopping malls etc., and God only knows when and where the next one will occur.

Time and again, we are heartbroken by the news of another mass shooting. Part of our healing must be the conviction that we will do everything in our power to keep these tragedies from happening in a nation that continues to face a pandemic of gun violence. It's not only the high-profile mass shootings that we must work to prevent, but also the daily death-by-guns that claims more than 30,000 lives every year.¹

Americans for the most part are more aware of the problem of gun violence than they have been in the past; however, the problem centers upon short-term outrage that lasts until the next mass shooting.

The debate about gun violence in America has fallen into a depressingly familiar routine. After every horrendous mass shooting, like the recent one of the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, or weekend spree of violence in Chicago, the media commences a few days of wall-to-wall coverage. Large numbers of Americans demand changes in gun laws. Experts debate various reforms on TV. When no changes are forthcoming, attention lags until the next mass shooting. Rinse and repeat.²

The question then becomes why is it that Americans' disgust and passion to reduce gun violence short lived? According to William V. Glastris Jr., there are two significant reasons for what appears as a never-ending cycle in which mass shootings still occur and nothing is done legislatively.

¹ Prevention Institute, "Gun Violence Must Stop. Here's What We Can Do to Prevent More Deaths," <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/focus-areas/preventing-violence-and-reducing-injury/preventing-violence-advocacy> (accessed June 24, 2020).

² William V. Glastris, "A Real Long-Term Solution to Gun Violence," *Washington Monthly*, December 2018, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/november-december-2018/a-real-longterm-solution-to-gun-violence/> (accessed June 24, 2020).

There are two principal reasons why we are stuck in this painful rut. The first is that the National Rifle Association, via its influence primarily within the Republican Party, has effective veto power over any gun legislation at the national level and in many states. The second is that the solutions that are typically discussed fail to match the scale of the problem. Banning military style semiautomatic weapons, regulating magazine clips, closing the gun show loophole, and preventing people with domestic violence restraining orders from acquiring weapons might well reduce levels of gun violence-to some extent. But it is hard to argue that these reforms, even if they all went into effect, would do much more than put a modest dent in the problem, and for a simple reason: there are just too many guns floating around.³

Mass shootings are defined by the murder of four or more people; however, the majority of murders committed in America result in both homicides and suicides.

Suicides have historically made up most deaths by firearms in the United States, research shows. In 2017, about 60 percent of gun deaths were suicides, while about 37 percent were homicides, according to an analysis of the C.D.C. data by the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, a public health think tank. (The group is a sister organization of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, an advocacy group that works to oppose the N.R.A.)⁴

The easy access to guns has led to an increase in homicides, suicides, and mass shootings. According to Gastris, gun violence has spiked since 2014.

Those that would advocate for the right to bear arms hide behind laws, such as the Second Amendment, state laws and “Stand Your Ground” laws. Although these laws were written in regard to self-defense of life and property, they have been cited to justify negligent and unjustifiable homicide, especially when it comes to people of color. “The Second Amendment wasn’t always as central to American politics as it is now. *Vox*

³ William Gastris.

⁴ Sara Mervosh, “Nearly 40,000 People Died From Guns in U.S. Last Year, Highest in 50 Years,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/us/gun-deaths.html> (accessed June 24, 2020).

breaks down how the NRA brought the Second Amendment to the forefront of the conversation in the nation, starting in the 1970s.”⁵

The case against “Stand Your Ground” gun laws is ever more compelling. Applied in one form or another in some three dozen states, these provisions allow ordinary citizens to use deadly force in self-defense even when violence could have been avoided simply by retreating. In effect, they extend the “castle doctrine,” which permits deadly force against home invaders, to public spaces. That’s a bad idea in principle, and a proven failure in practice.⁶

According to *USA Today*,

These laws provide either immunity from prosecution or a defense during trial in cases in which a person uses deadly force in public, even if he or she can safely retreat. The obvious consequence is that armed citizens are more emboldened to escalate public altercations, and that people of color are paying the price.⁷

According to Michael W. Austin in *God And Guns In America*, the right to own a gun may be a legal right and a moral right; however, it is also a conditional right when it comes down to the laws of the land. In other words, one cannot and should not use the right to bear arms as a right to kill at will. He also states that laws, such as “Stand Your Ground,” have contributed to the slaughter of African Americans based on a perceived notion that the perpetrator’s life was in imminent danger.

Whites who kill blacks are eleven times more likely to be found innocent of a crime in the states with stand-your-ground-laws than blacks who kill whites. The rationalization for the killings of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis- and we can add Philando Castro, Stephon Clark, and Walter

⁵ Caroline Burke, “17 Articles about Gun Violence in America That Put the Epidemic into Perspective,” *Bustle*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/17-articles-about-gun-violence-in-america-that-put-the-epidemic-into-perspective-15519301> (accessed June 24, 2020).

⁶ Editorial Board, “The Travesty of ‘Stand Your Ground’,” <https://www.bloombergquint.com/gadfly/repeal-stand-your-ground-gun-laws> (accessed June 24, 2020).

⁷ Editorial Board, “People of color are paying the price for stand your ground laws: Today’s talker,” *USA Today*, July 7, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/policing/spotlight/2018/07/30/stand-your-ground-florida-markeis-mcglackton-shooting-policing-usa/866902002/> (accessed June 24, 2020).

Scott — reveal “a common thread: our legal structures and agents deemed it reasonable to perceive (unarmed) Black people as threatening.”⁸

There is no question that the effects of gun violence have devastating consequences on families, communities, youth, and people from all walks of life. The consequences are economic, psychological, and social.

Children are harmed in numerous ways, abuse drugs and alcohol, suffer from depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder, resort to aggressive and violent behavior; and engage in criminal activity. Exposure to community violence, including witnessing shootings and hearing gunshots, makes it harder for children to succeed in school.⁹

Gun violence does not have just psychological effects on children but physical as well.

Exposure to gun violence can also erode physical health. When children live in neighborhoods where gun violence is common, they spend less time playing and being physically active, with one study finding that children said they would engage in an additional hour of physical activity every week if safety increased in their neighborhood.¹⁰

There are various things that the church and pastors can do to help curb gun violence in the communities where they serve from using houses of worship in buyback guns; lobbying local, state, and federal governments to implement laws for stricter mandatory background checks; collaborating with other organizations or nonprofits that focus on social justice issues pertaining to gun violence; and creating ministries inside the church that will counsel families that fall prey to gun violence and workshops that will get young people talking about their fears, concerns, and attitudes toward gun violence.

⁸ Michael W. Austin, *God and Guns in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), 30.

⁹ Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “The Impact of Gun Violence on Children & Teens,” <https://everytownresearch.org/impact-gun-violence-american-children-teens/> (accessed June 24, 2020).

¹⁰ Ibid.

Hopefully, this demonstration project will bring awareness to the seriousness of the crisis of gun violence, a motivation to do something about it among my clergy colleagues, and collaborations formed that will bring about changes in our churches and the communities to which we are called to serve. I humbly anticipate ministries will be developed within churches that will benefit youth and young adults, deal with trauma of gun violence, and advocacy for safer communities that will abate the violence caused by reckless shootings which lead to murder. It is up to the church, especially the Black church, to move with a sense of urgency, as it appears that no other community has been more affected by gun violence than the urban setting.

The more we can do to keep guns out of the hands of those who would kill, the better. Gun violence is a problem for those living in the areas where poverty is prevalent. In addition, African Americans are sixteen times more likely to be homicide victims than non-Hispanic whites. Young men (ages fifteen to thirty-four) make up half of all murder victims. In this age group, homicide is the leading cause of death for African Americans, and the second leading cause of death for Latinos. Of all murders in the age group, guns are used 84 percent of the time.¹¹

My site-team will assist in the organization of the events that will bring clergy together. It will include a breakfast as an introduction to how they can play a big part in the project, and a workshop that will be conducted by clergy in Brooklyn known as the GodSquad about what they have done and are doing to help curb gun violence in their communities through collaboration with the local precincts. The site-team will also assist me in the collection of the written pieces which will be done by some of the clergy and will involve deadlines. The site-team will help me critique the writings and will work

¹¹ Austin, *God and Guns in America*, 79.

with me and clergy to develop a clear and concise educational piece that can be replicated in local churches.

A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens began his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, stating that “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” I believe that we are living in the best of times and the worst of times. I believe it is the best of times for the Church to take the Gospel to the world, for life has become complicated with a pandemic that has plagued that world. People are looking for answers and don’t know how they are going to make it from day to day. This pandemic brought governments, states, and cities to its knees, and we may never return to the norm that we once knew. This is the best of times for the Church to witness, offering hope through preaching and teaching, and being the living example of what a Christian looks like in the face of opposition and despair.

It is the worst of times when we have witnessed the rise of gun violence all across the United States, from inner cities to suburbs. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that statistics would rise to the point that they have risen, nor that this action dissertation would take on greater meaning or importance as it does in this present day. CNN reported on July 5, 2021 that at least 150 were killed in over 400 shootings over the weekend across the United States, and that out of 336 mass shootings, there were 337 people killed, and 1,401 people injured across the United States. According to *CNN Politics*, so far 2021 is on pace to be the worst year for gun violence in decades — surpassing even the high levels of last year.

According to the Gun Violence Archive from January 1 to September 15, a total of 14, 516 people died from gun violence in the US. That’s 1,300 more than during the same period in 2020, a 9% increase. Mass shootings are also on the rise. Through September 15, there have been 498 mass

shootings across the US, or an average of about 1.92 per day according to data from the GVA.¹²

The increase in gun violence in and of itself has the organizations talking and attempting to move to some type of action involving clergy of all faiths. There has been an awakening by clergy due to daily news reports of gun fatalities and conversations are occurring. I have had the opportunity to sit at the table with clergy, government officials, and nonprofits that are concerned and want to do something about gun violence. I have also been given the opportunity to host summits with clergy and bring professionals to the table to educate clergy in what they can do in their communities and in collaboration with other nonprofits that are doing the work. I will address this more in detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Awareness is a big part of this dissertation as previously stated, but assessment by clergy as to what they are doing and are willing to do is another part, and finally what action(s) are they willing to take in mustering positive change in the churches they pastor and the communities in which they serve.

Why the rise in such violence? There are a number of reasons for the rise in gun violence from simple access or accessibility, psychological disorders concerning purchasers, illegal or underground purchases, and lenient to minimal background checks just to name a few. The shootings that occur in the inner cities are to a large extent gang and drug related as opposed to the suburbs where mass shootings are more common and occur for different reasons that result mostly from mental health. But as statistics have shown in the past, homicides are the number two cause of gun fatalities, suicide being

¹² Holmes Lybrand, "The Spike in Gun Violence Continues with 2021 on Pace to be the Worst Year in Decades," *CNN Politics*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/19/politics/gun-violence-spike-2021-explainer/index.html> (accessed January 23, 2022).

number one. Clergy has to come up with ways to respond with preventative measures to help curb such violence that plagues the communities in which they serve. The church has suffered loss in relation to such violence, Greater Emmanuel AME being a prime example of the effects of a society bent on self-defense or the right to bear arms.

There's A Blessing in The Storm!

I grew up in Harlem during the eighties, my mother's one and only. My mother worked hard to raise me and did everything she could to make sure that I received a quality education. I was blessed to have gone to some elite private schools, such as Allen-Stevenson and York Preparatory, in spite of my mother's measly minimum wage paying job of \$3.35. Needless to say, it really was grace and mercy that brought me through a privileged education. I thank God for a mother who sacrificed, providing for me academically but also ensuring that I had a relationship with the Lord. It wasn't easy growing up in Harlem in the midst of what would be known as the "crack era," due to the escalation in violence, particularly gun violence that was rampant during this time period. Homicides within the urban setting are nothing new, nor are drugs, nor the gangs that perpetuate such behavior. The selling and abusing of crack resulted not only in homicides, but also in the need for family services to protect children from neglect/abuse. The first real job I undertook after graduating from Hobart College was with the Administration of Children's Services as a case worker with the City of New York. I worked in this field for six years and then transitioned to the Department of Probation Juvenile Intensive Supervision Program in which I worked with at-risk youth in determining whether or not they were eligible for the program in conjunction with monitoring those that were already on probation under the program. Interestingly enough, every professional job where I worked prepared me for what the Lord would have me

doing in ministry as a Deacon, Youth Minister, and Assistant Pastor at the Antioch Baptist Church in Harlem, NY.

The first funeral I attended of a young man whose life was snuffed out through gun violence was Ben, my friend and Christian brother with whom I grew up singing in the Youth Choir. Ben was shot and killed in Coop City in the early nineties because he tried to protect a young lady who had gotten into a dispute with an estranged boyfriend. Ben was shot and killed in the parking lot outside of the movie theatre and his service took place at Antioch. Attending such a service and offering the prayer of comfort opened my eyes to the impact of loss and grief of a mother who loses a child in such a devastating manner, and the fact that young people also grieve hard. Ben was twenty-one.

The first sermon I would preach concerning a death related to gun violence incident was at Antioch for a young man that I didn't know but who was a friend to parishioners of the church. The shooting was said to be gang related. The young man lived in the Bronx and was the father of two sons. The church was packed with grieving adults but mostly young people who came in reeking of marijuana, wearing gang colors, carrying flags, cursing, and angry enough to resort to violence at the drop of a dime. I preached from the parable of the prodigal son and brought up Tupac and his poem the "The Rose That Grew beyond the Concrete." I had to put my faith over my fears on that night not knowing what could or would jump off. The lesson I learned was that at times ministry will put one in perilous situations or predicaments where one puts his/her life on the line. It is during these times that we witness the greatest miracles, healings, soul winning, and blessings. It is where the blessings in the storm outweigh the risk and the

dangers. Clergy needs to realize that authentic ministry involves sacrifice and service that can often end with one being nailed to the cross.

I learned a lot from a friend that transitioned a few years before the pandemic, who dropped and left his mantle and taught me and my colleagues what genuine self-sacrifice looks like. He was one of the first responders to shootings of young people in Harlem, NY; he wasn't afraid to get into gang bangers' faces and preach "stop killing one another." He organized and participated in peace marches and rallies; and he even did a workshop for the youth and young adults of our church in my earlier years as pastor. He was one who walked with a picture scrap book of every young person he knew and didn't know who was a victim of gun violence, none other than the late Reverend Vernon Williams. It was Reverend Williams who would show up on the night of the funeral at Antioch Baptist Church and who would bring peace in the midst of chaos and the storm, the service for the young father of two sons born and reared in the Bronx. Thomas was twenty-two.

The Harlem I grew up in no longer exists. The new Harlem is one of booming businesses, new restaurants, coops and condominiums — byproducts of gentrification, a multi-ethnic mosaic of different creeds, faiths, sexual orientations, and cultures. Oftentimes I do not recognize the new Harlem, and there is very little reflection of the old Harlem left. But on April 3, 2021, I was given the opportunity to bring forth the Inspirational Word at Reverend Al Sharpton's House of Justice during the NAN rally. I have always admired Reverend Al from a distance as he and my late Pastor Reverend Alfloyd Alston were friends. During Reverend Alston's tenure, I met Reverend Al who

preached my late pastor's banquets and Men's Day at Antioch where I had presented him with an honorarium.

I, like many others, had heard about Reverend Al's reputation and seen things on the news whether it was good or bad, and the only thing I could conclude from any of it was that he was controversial down through the years. One of the things I did admire about Reverend Al was that during the eighties, when the police claimed they didn't know where the crack houses were, Reverend Al went around marking them by spray painting an X on the doors of each, making them identifiable to law enforcement.

I also mentioned this in writing my Credo for my MDiv. I have supported Reverend Al by joining the National Action Network on more than one occasion and offering financial support as he brings light to the issues that plague the African American community, so to bring forth the word on this particular Saturday, in the Harlem that I once knew and grew up in was a distinct honor for me. As the preacher for the Saturday rally, one is given a time limit of seven minutes and this is where my seminary training would have to kick in, a hit it and quit it! The sermon topic was "There's a Blessing in The Storm"; the text was from Matthew 14:25-32 when Jesus met His disciples in the storm and Peter walked on water. The reactions of being caught in a storm are fear, seek cover, flee, by all means try to get through it. Rarely, if at all does one look for blessings while going through a storm, only a desire to have it over and done with. I started out describing the spiritual storms that we find ourselves in and, of course, I mentioned gun violence, the need to search for blessings, and the blessings that were outlined in the text. First, Jesus saw them from afar struggling against the winds and waves and went to where they were; second, they witnessed one of the greatest miracles

in Peter's walking on the water to meet Jesus; lastly, when Peter took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink, he cried out, "Lord save me!" Jesus takes him by the hand and they both enter into the boat together. The blessings: God is able to meet us in our storms, trials, and tribulations; God is able to give us power to walk on the very thing that should have killed us; and God is able to save us from the very thing that should have killed us. There is a blessing or blessings that we can encounter in the midst of our storms! The blessings that can come from the pandemic of gun violence are a move from talk to actions; changes in gun laws that are universal across all states, such as mandatory, critical background checks, youth recreational programs and employment, and special programs that will deal with gangs and violence. I grew up in a Harlem that for me represented despair that was birthed through drug sales, abuse, gun violence, and premature death. The Harlem that I now see is one of hope and possibilities for a few; hopefully, one day it will be that Harlem for everyone.

From Wrong Turn to Uth-Turn

As a youth advocate for over twenty years, I strongly believe in preventative nonprofits in which problems and issues are addressed before they blow up. Programs, such as Probation, Pius XII-Youth and Family Services, Harlem Children's Zones Family Empowerment Program, and, yes, New York Theological Seminary's Uth-Turn opened my eyes to the importance of prevention and the importance of collaboration. During my first five years of pastoring, I would create a youth program called Check Urself B4 U Wreck Urself in which its workshops were administered by a NYPD police officer who happened to be one of my parishioners. The same officer who would be promoted to detective also contributed to the assessment piece for the clergy within this dissertation.

Authors, former NBA players, and sororities/fraternities were invited and spoke to the youth and young adults, adding a mentoring component to the program.

I began my journey at NYTS in August 2000 when the seminary was located on 5th Avenue in the thirties and was about to move to its current location at 475 Riverside Drive. I entered the seminary as an MDiv student but would switch to the Master of Professional Studies Program from which I graduated in May 2007. During this time, I applied to and was enrolled in the Uth-Turn program that was under the leadership of Rev. Dr. C. Vernon Mason. This program was unique in that it gave scholars the creative tools to work with at-risk youth and allowed us the opportunity to be hands-on in churches and probation's Alternate to Detention Program by mentoring and counseling youths in ways that were more impactful. Uth-Turn also brought collaborations between those that graduated from the Master of Professional Studies program at Sing Sing and the interns from the college, creating a powerful connection. If gun violence is going to be abated it will take collaborations between clergy, law enforcement, nonprofits, politicians, and communities. No one entity can solve this problem!

The goal and concept behind Uth-Turn was to help turn a young person's life around through workshops, mentoring, individual/group counseling, and a lot of hands-on work. In the classroom, interns read books, such as *The Pact* (three African American men that made a pact and all became doctors), Geoffrey Canada's, *Stick, Fist, Knife Gun*, and *Reaching Up for Manhood* that offered hope and ideas that would reach beyond the classroom to the very places where hope is so desperately needed.

Jesus tells the parable commonly known as the Prodigal Son in the 15th chapter of Luke. In this parable, the son who left home takes a wrong turn in wasting his father's

inheritance and has to take a menial job feeding swine, which is the worse and lowest job a Jew could find himself doing. What made it even worse, the story tells, is that he would have eaten the pigs slop due to his hunger. But something happened in that pigpen which caused a change of heart in the young man, reflecting on how good he had once had it and the servants have it in his father's house. The prodigal son got up and out of the pigpen and humbly returned home on the right road now, with the hope of a brighter future. Uth-Turn brought us to that pigpen where that wayward boy or girl was wallowing and we became that mentor, that voice of reason, that example of hope, and that testimony that "if I can do it, you can do it!" The program moved thousands of at-risk from a wrong turn to Uth-Turn!

I was able to build friendships in ministry that I have kept to this day through Uth-Turn. My friend and seminarian brother, Pastor Kahlil James and I have preached for each other and worked closely together in an effort to offer hope to the communities in which we serve. I also was able to land a job with the Harlem Children's Zone as a result of meeting the former CEO, Geoffrey Canada, when me and a fellow intern interviewed him during our Uth-Turn experience. I started in a preventive program as a Crisis Intervention Counselor, was elevated to Supervisor of the Program, and the final position I was groomed for was the Assistant Director of their Afterschool Programs. It was an honor and a privilege to serve the community in which I grew up in. I stayed with HCZ for seven years.

Operation Fresh Start

I am probably big on nonprofits because I have worked for them for over twenty years and have seen how effective they can operate if managed correctly. This is why my wife and I started our own nonprofit in 2012 called Operation Fresh Start which caters to

the family. Operation Fresh Start has blessed numerous children with book bags and school supplies, families with winter coats and groceries, and young adults who are attending their first year of college with money for books.

Every year, prior to the pandemic, the church hosted a Community Outreach Day, usually on the second or third Saturday in August. During this time, we often partner with other organizations (see Appendix C: Partnering with NYTS). I would pay for the permits, including a sound permit, from the City to close off the streets. Operation Fresh Start invited nonprofits, including colleges, to give out information about their organizations, fed the community hamburgers and hotdogs, and would rent the jungle gym for the children and host a table giving away school supplies. Local politicians would contribute and stop by to address the community, the churches choirs and praise team would sing, and a deejay kept the party going as there was dancing in the streets. I loved the Outreach Day and how the church, community, and government all came together, the smiles on the children's faces as they entered and played inside of the jungle gym. It was just a glimpse of how our society could be without the fear or threat of gun violence. The Outreach Day was a demonstration of the power of God and the gospel once the church reaches beyond its four walls, but what I didn't know was that it was preparing the church for something greater in that of outdoor worship service. It certainly was a beautiful day in the neighborhood!

No Justice No Peace!

The initial Adam Clayton Powell Jr. cohort began in January 2019 with a discussion on whether or not the church is alive and still relevant in a day and age where it appears to have lost her voice and power. History often revisits and has recorded the power of the church during the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties and yet has grown

silent afterwards up until today where there is racial unrest, discrimination on so many levels, classism, sexism, mass incarceration, hunger, homelessness, poverty, immigration issues, natural disasters, climate change, abortion debates, police brutality, insurrections, criminal activity on levels unheard of in the past, and a recent worldwide pandemic. The question: how can the church keep quiet in the midst of all this? There are those that believe that the church should not be involved in social justice issues and thus pastors and churches refrain from marches, preaching on critical and controversial subjects, or speaking truth to power. Could this silence have led to the death of the church as social agent in effecting change in the earth? Perhaps the church had to die for God to raise up a glorious resurrected church that will cry loud and spare not, a church that will go beyond its four walls and serve the community, a church that will be an advocate for social justice issues which will bring about changes in gun and police reform, a church that will build recreational programs that will offer hope to the youth, a church that is for everyone and not a social club for a few, a church that will answer the call to follow Christ by realizing the true call of dying to self. There are no mega preachers in the resurrected church but there is mega ministry. The resurrected church is the church that understands the real meaning of the Great Commission as outlined in Matthew 28:16-20 but takes it a step further in carrying it out. If truth be told, the church died a long time ago by the lack of works, for after all, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26 KJV). If the church died a long time ago, the pandemic buried her by closing the doors. Some churches will stay in the grave but the resurrected church is rising and has risen with power and a testimony to what God can and will do. The resurrected church will continually engage in the powers

and wrestle against spiritual wickedness in communities, governments, academic institutions, prisons, suburbs, urban settings, homes, churches, and any other high places.

My intentions are not to beat up on the church, because I also stand guilty as charged in not doing enough and should have done more, and not knowing what to do is no excuse for not doing anything. The attitude of the church has been “if it doesn’t affect us, no need to get involved.” The church has been locked in a power struggle with herself for years, fighting over who’s in charge, debating over what colors to wear for what anniversary, and planning the menu in between services. I know because I was caught up in the foolishness of the church doing its own thing, with an apathy toward what really matters is what Jesus requires of His bride. The church had to die and come to the realization that it is dead and in need of resurrection power in the best way!

I can see clearly now the fire that burns within a resurrected church: the desire to worship beyond the four walls, the desire to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, the desire to offer the true and living hope of the Gospel; and I have witnessed the transformation in the lives of those that receive ministry that is offered. I have heard the countless stories of those that were moved to tears from receiving clothes, food, and the Gospel. The fire and desire of the resurrected church that can’t keep her still nor quiet, “no justice, no peace, no gun reform, no peace, no adequate housing, no peace, no police reform, no peace, no incarceration reform, no peace...” This brings me back to Reverend Al and the call he has had on his life in bringing attentions to prevalent issues and being the voice of the voiceless. The resurrected church understands the need of such a voice.

Why Black Lives Matter!

I had arrived to work early and needed to kill some time, so I decided to go to Dunkin Donuts. I got out of the car and walked through the first door of the restaurant,

and upon approaching the second door two young people, a White male and female couple, began approaching the door where I stood, so I held it open for both and they walked right through it and neither opened their mouths to say “thank you” as would have been my reaction had such a courtesy been awarded to me. My natural reaction was to turn and look as they pressed through the next door which was being held by an older White male, to whom I heard the young lady loudly say, “thank you!” Perhaps I would have thought nothing more of it and attributed it just to their rudeness, but, because they knew the proper response and gave it to the older White gentleman, I couldn’t help but think the slight was on purpose. But whether it was or wasn’t, it made me reflect on race relations in America and how African Americans throughout history were and still are an invisible race. An unseen people whose very existence has been denied despite athletic gifting and entertaining, despite fighting and dying for this country, despite great inventions and helping build America’s economy, and despite the first African American President (President Barak Hussein Obama). Still invisible! I wish I could blame it all on Trump but the truth of the matter is he just gave racist, sexist, and other “ists” permission to come out and be proud of who they are, but this wound has been festering for years and as much as America celebrates its diversity, it still has not come to grips with loving unconditionally, which the Bible points to in reference to how God loves us. America continues to fail in loving her neighbor as it does itself!

The Black Lives Matter movement has gotten the country in an uproar due to the injustices brought by police brutality, the murder of innocent Black males and females at the hands of racist organizations, the mass incarceration of the innocent and strict, harsh sentences of the guilty, the death of hundreds of thousands of African Americans due to

poverty (poor healthcare, poor nutrition, poor housing, poor education, poor economics). African Americans lead the categories when it comes to death from diseases, homicides, and other negative life threatening lists. If all lives matter, then Black lives have to matter but it must start with Black people. Black lives have to matter to Black people before it will matter to others. This means eating better, attending school and learning, exercising, making good investments with the little money earned, and yes, stop shooting and killing one another.

I wrote my Credo in 2016 on Black Liberation Theology in which I cited the late, great Professor Dr. James Cone. I've read many of Dr. Cones books and even had the opportunity to hear him lecture at Union Theological Seminary on one of his last books, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Cone is known as the father of Black Liberation Theology and what attracted me to his writings was his statement that God is the God of the oppressed, the God of Israelite slaves down in Egypt, the God of those that are suffering no matter race, creed, or color ... and Black people fit that description. Now, Cone is not saying that this God is limited to Black people but has been enriched by the history of Blacks from slavery to Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement to the "crack era" and mass incarceration to today. What Dr. Cone was relaying all along is Black Lives Matter!

I hope and pray that my colleagues in ministry understand that we cannot believe this and sit comfortably in our pulpits, in our churches enjoying Jesus, singing, dancing, speaking in tongues while Pookie shot and laid out Ray Ray in front of the church gates or doors. We cannot believe that Black Lives Matter and do nothing when we read and hear about a mass shooting in a school in Columbine, or a church in Charleston SC

named Mother Emmanuel AME, or the slaying of a man while jogging in the State of Georgia, Ahmaud Arbery. If Black lives really matter, we will be moved to action as opposed to apathy. I entered the House of Justice on that weekend in April right after the George Floyd conviction; there was such a sigh of relief and even celebration that there was a conviction, finally a ray or beam of hope to a people that have been enslaved and are still invisible. Finally, a ray or beam of hope that echoed, “no justice, no peace and Black lives do matter!”

CHAPTER 4 THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENCE

The Origin of Violence

Living in a world where violence is running rampant and murder appears to have become the norm, what does God say concerning violence, self-defense, and the usage of weapons of warfare? Elohim states, “Thou shall not kill,” and yet it appears violence, even killing is justified in different texts within the Bible. This section will examine violence, self-defense, and the use of weaponry from a spiritual perspective. Scriptures pertaining to violence, self-defense, and weaponry will be examined in relation to how the Christian stance and outlook might be shaped by the Word of God.

Why is it that we are a people drawn to violence, whether it be war, shootings, road rage, domestic violence, police brutality, gang violence, violence in movies, violence in video games, violence in music and videos? Perhaps we need to go back to the beginning or the genesis of violence as outlined in the Bible. Violence in relation and acquaintance with sin entered into the world after the transgressions of our spiritual fore-parents, Adam and Eve. The result was the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and the second transgression brought about by sin, the murder of Abel at the hands of his very own brother, Cain. However, even in the midst of such a violent act, Yahweh’s mercy was readily available to Cain when he requested it, in the form of a mark from God, so that nobody would harm him as he had caused harm to his brother. “No!” the Lord said. “Anyone who kills you will be punished seven times worse than I

am punishing you.” So, the Lord put a mark on Cain to warn everyone not to kill him (Genesis 4:15 CEV). We do not know how Cain killed Abel; whether he used what might be considered a weapon, e.g., a rock, a tree limb or his bare hands? The fact that blood was spilled, however, is an indicator that Cain probably used some type of instrument as a weapon to kill his brother.

Moses was an Israelite and raised as an Egyptian. While visiting his kin saw one of his Israelite brothers being beaten by an Egyptian and when the opportunity presented itself, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand (Exodus 2:11-22). Now to Moses’s defense, he was not yet given the Ten Commandments nor all the other laws that went along with it them, although Elohim did not rebuke him. This murder would put Moses on the run, making him a fugitive from Pharaoh once the word got out in Egypt. God would use this incident to bring Moses to a place where he could prepare him for the next level of ministry, a return to Egypt and the exodus of God’s people.

Yahweh, in the Book of Judges, uses Samson to avenge Israel from their enemies, the Philistines, by allowing him to kill a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey or an ass. “Samson glanced around and spotted the jawbone of a donkey. The jawbone had not yet dried out, so it was still hard and heavy. Samson grabbed it and started hitting Philistines—he killed 1,000 of them” (Judges 15:16 CEV). Samson’s jawbone could be the equivalent of an AK-14 assault rifle today, which is able to kill in mass numbers without being reloaded. Yahweh used Samson in an act of vengeance toward the Philistines, thus demonstrating in scripture that God can use violence for His/Her own purpose. Elohim who wrote the commandment, “thou shalt not kill” and gave the Law(s) to Israel allows and justifies murder and violence throughout the Old

Testament and the question becomes, why? Was this a command given solely to Israel that they should not murder one another, or was this a commandment that came with occasional exceptions as only allowed in particular incidences orchestrated by Yahweh?

The Jews that were in captivity down in Shushan were allowed to defend themselves against their enemies after Queen Esther foiled the plan of genocide outlined by one of the King's high officials, Haman.

Later that day, someone told the king how many people had been killed in Susa. Then he told Esther, "Five hundred people, including Haman's ten sons, have been killed in Susa alone. If that many were killed here, what must have happened in the provinces? Is there anything else you want done? Just tell me, and it will be done." Esther answered, "Your Majesty, please let the Jews in Susa fight to defend themselves tomorrow, just as they did today. And order the bodies of Haman's ten sons to be hanged in public" (Esther 9:11-13, CEV).

This account is another example of where violence to the point of killing is overlooked or justified. The reason — self-defense. Interestingly enough, those who apply for firearms site the main reason for application is that of self-defense. However, there are very few cases in which self-defense has been proven in relation to homicides and thus deemed justifiable. George Zimmerman used the "Stand Your Ground" defense and was acquitted of murdering a teen who posed no threat to him, yet followed Trayvon Martin and harassed him to the point of agitation which led to his murder. I will deal with the "Stand Your Ground" laws and the Second Amendment in the next section of this chapter. Self-defense appears to be another one of the exceptions to the "thou shalt not kill" commandment given to Moses by Yahweh.

In the Book of Joshua God assures Joshua, Moses' successor, that he will be with him as he was with Yahweh's servant Moses. In so doing, Israel is to march around the walls of Jericho for seven days and afterwards shout only when given the signal by

Joshua. This would be the first of many conquests of Israel in which God promised to give or bless Israel. Yahweh also gave instructions to Joshua and Israel to kill and destroy everyone in Jericho with one exception, Rahab, a harlot and her family, whom God spared for her heroic bravery in sheltering and hiding the spies that were sent to spy out the land.

They killed everyone, men and women, young and old, everyone except Rahab and the others in her house. They even killed every cow, sheep, and donkey. Joshua said to the two men who had been spies, “Rahab kept you safe when I sent you to Jericho. We promised to protect her and her family, and we will keep that promise. Now go into her house and bring them out” (Joshua 6:25-26 CEV).

Like with Cain, Yahweh’s mercy extends beyond the walls of Jericho to a known sinner and her family. Although there is violence, God’s mercy still abounds.

There are numerous accounts of violence and killing throughout the Old Testament as I have just mentioned a few. What are we to make of this? I believe that Yahweh uses violence for the good of Yahweh even if He/She does not totally agree with it. This allows Yahweh to use the violence that entered into existence from the result of sin, at His/Her own discretion. Obviously, there are times when Yahweh allowed the violence to happen and even participated in some of the battles in fighting for Israel. “And while these troops were going down through Beth-Horon Pass, the Lord made huge hailstones fall on them all the way to Azekah. More of the enemy soldiers died from the hail than from the Israelite weapons” (Joshua 10:11 CEV).

The penalty for breaking certain commandments came with violent consequences, at times inclusive of death. The principle of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” came into play and was just retribution for whatever violence was meted out toward a person. King David committed adultery and was a conspirator to the killing of

Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, putting him in the line of fire on the battlefield. Technically, the breaking of both these commandments should have resulted in the death penalty, but God would spare King David's life, although he would still be penalized for the sins with the death of his son, and David's household would be in disarray for the rest of his days.

Because you wouldn't obey me and took Uriah's wife for yourself, your family will never live in peace. Someone from your own family will cause you a lot of trouble, and I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes. He will go to bed with them while everyone looks on. What you did was in secret, but I will do this in the open for everyone in Israel to see." David said, "I have disobeyed the Lord." "Yes, you have!" Nathan answered. "You showed you didn't care what the Lord wanted. He has forgiven you, and you won't die. But your newborn son will" (II Samuel 12:10-14 CEV).

Again, this is an example of Yahweh's mercy coming into play in refraining from killing King David, but, at the same time he does not let him off the hook. David will give an account for his transgressions but not to the full extent of the law or punishment, which is death. David would appear to be another exception to the rule when it comes to sin, but his family would reap the consequences of his behavior.

The Defense in Self-Defense

If in the Old Testament Yahweh uses violence to achieve His/Her will, and makes exceptions to the commandments that were given concerning Israel, and to the extent that Israel carries out battles, or other violent acts, Jesus, throughout the Gospels, takes a more submissive and defensive stance.

You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well (Matthew 5:38-40 CEV).

Jesus stated this during his Sermon on the Mount in which he addresses the Old Testament injunction of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” One of the distinctions between the old covenant and new is that the New Testament takes a more submissive approach. Christians have debated this scripture down through time as to whether or not Jesus meant the phrase literally or spiritually. The challenge of literally turning the cheek by refusing to retaliate if threatened with physical violence, would be a difficult thing to do, especially when the nature of humankind is to defend oneself. Thus, Jesus is requiring a different way of life from what Israel was used to under the old covenant. L. Daniel Hawk expresses it this way in his book, *The Violence of the Biblical God*:

The matter of self-defense is left open. The reference to striking the other cheek may be interpreted to include striking back in self-defense, but as noted above, a strong case can also be made that the saying refers to the refusal to retaliate for an insult. Jesus’s teachings on enemy love and non-retaliation, in other words, provide no unassailable basis for claiming that Jesus prohibited violence in all forms. Jesus’s words fundamentally reorient one’s dispositions toward enemies and admonish his followers to act accordingly. But taking vengeance is a different matter than defending one’s life or the lives of others. On that matter, Jesus’s words are not so easy to pin down.¹³

Jesus also speaks to the concept of self-defense and self-denial, which could result in the losing of one’s life.

Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23, 24 NIV).

¹³ L. Daniel Hawk, *The Violence of the Biblical God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2019), 182.

Jesus also stated this in relation to his own death which would be a violent one through crucifixion.

Jesus, throughout the Gospels, avoids physical confrontation; when possible, Jesus said what he said and kept it moving. There were times when the Jews wanted to stone Christ but he kept it moving. Again, they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp (John 10:39 NIV).

Jesus rebukes his disciple, Peter, when the Jews and the Romans come to take Jesus by force and Peter cuts off the ear of Malchus. Jesus not only rebukes Peter; he also turns around and heals Malchus.

When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns" (Luke 22:49-53 NIV).

It is certainly apparent that Jesus did not come to start a revolution, nor a riot and had every intention of abating such by both his words and actions. Jesus did not carry a sword but a cross which is a significant point that Michael W. Austin expresses in *God and Guns in America* in relation to Liberty University's stance on classes encouraging gun possession:

Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin argue that Jesus carried a cross, not a gun. He told us to love our enemies, not kill them. He scolded Peter for drawing and using a sword. When he told Peter to put away the sword, Jesus was disarming every Christian. Christians, then, should follow in the steps of the Savior. The love of Jesus means his followers "would rather die with a cross in our hands than a gun." They should lay down their lives, dying, not killing, in the name of Christ. As they put it, it is "hard to imagine Jesus enrolling for the concealed weapons class at Liberty

University or anywhere else. And it is even harder to imagine Jesus approving of the words of Falwell as he openly threatened Muslims.¹⁴

Choose Your Weapon

The Apostle Paul in letters, throughout his writings, clearly tells the church that the weapons by which it fights with are spiritual weapons that must be used in spiritual warfare.

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:14-15 NIV).

Throughout his letters to the churches, Paul encourages the use of spiritual weapons that is a reflection of the armor of a Roman soldier.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:10-17 NIV).

Paul's counsel to the church is clear, it should not resort to worldly weapons to fight the spiritual battles that it is faced with, but the weapons it should use are prayer, the Word, faith, salvation, righteousness, truth, and peace. It is what I have labelled in past

¹⁴ Austin, 109.

writings and on my social media page on a weekly basis as The Sword Not the Gun and the hashtag #theswordnotthegun Ephesians 6:17.

Guns give people a false sense of security as the main reason for packing according to the majority of gun carriers is not hunting but self-defense. Yet suicide is the number one cause of gun fatalities in the United States, and the majority of people who commit homicides the majority are known to the carrier. It has also been demonstrated that a gun in the household does not make the home safer, but, on the contrary, increases the number of suicides, domestic violence homicides, and unintentional fatalities, such as those that occur when a child gets his/her hands on a gun. The majority of the legal gun owners hide behind the 2nd Amendment, the Constitutional right to bear arms, which will be explored in the next section.

Law and Order

A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed (Constitution of the United States of America 1789).

The Law of Moses cannot do this, because our selfish desires make the Law weak. But God set you free when he sent his own Son to be like us sinners and to be a sacrifice for our sin. God used Christ's body to condemn sin. He did this, so that we would do what the Law commands by obeying the Spirit instead of our own desire (Romans 8:3-4 CEV).

The forefathers of America drafted the Constitution of the United States of America. The Second Amendment was drafted during a time when the colonies would often come under attack from the British in an effort to overtake the land and to bring her into submission to British authority and rule. Although there was a national army, it was decided that the States could organize their own militias to fight against the British, and in essence keep their guns to fend off such attacks that might occur. James Madison expressed his feeling concerning state militias as such:

Madison volleyed back a few days later. In *Federalist* 46, his frustration seemed palpable. “Let a regular army, fully equal to the resources of the country, be formed, and let it be entirely at the devotion of the federal government; still it would not be going too far to say that the State governments with the people on their side would be able to repel the danger,” he insisted. If a standing army were formed, he wrote it would not grow larger than 25,000 to 30,000 men. “To these would be opposed a militia amounting to near half a million of citizens with arms in their hands, officered by men chosen among themselves, fighting for their common liberties and united and conducted by governments possessing their affections and confidence. It may well be doubted whether a militia thus circumstanced could ever be conquered by such a proportion of regular troops.” State militias, well-armed and trained, led by men democratically chosen, could fight off a standing army.¹⁵

The idea behind a well organize militia then was to secure the states and the federal government, which in essence would be self-defense, and this would be the understanding for years after, until a reinterpretation of the law by the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in the District of Columbia v. Heller.

The Second Amendment to the United States Constitution protects an individual’s right to keep and bear arms, unconnected with service in a militia, for traditionally lawful purposes, such as self-defense within the home, and the District of Columbia’s handgun ban and requirement that lawfully owned rifles and shotguns be kept “unloaded and disassembled or bound by a trigger lock” violated this guarantee. It also stated that the right to bear arms is not unlimited and that guns and gun ownership would continue to be regulated. It was the first the Supreme Court case to decide whether the Second Amendment protects an individual right to bear arms for self-defense or if the right was intended for state militias.¹⁶

The reinterpretation of the law to include self-defense in the home would increase the number of firearm purchases taking the right to defend oneself to another level. Justice Scalia did emphasize the importance of proper background checks and that this should not be a liberty given to everyone without accountability but somewhere the last

¹⁵ Michael Waldmen, *The Second Amendment: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 41-42.

¹⁶ District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570 (2008).

part of his decision got lost in the interpretation with the emphasis solely on “self-defense.” Pro-gun activist groups such as the National Rifle Association would take this decision and run with it.

It is important to note that when the Second Amendment was written it excluded women, Native Americans, and Blacks who were slaves at the time. Thus, gun ownership was solely a privilege given White males.

The eighteenth-century origins of the “right to bear arms” explicitly excluded Black people. South Carolina encoded into law that the enslaved could not “carry or make use of fire-arms or any offensive weapons whatsoever” unless “in the presence of some white person.” Moreover, the state’s various militias had the “power to search and examine all negro-houses for offensive weapons and ammunition.” In Delaware, there could be no valid earthly reason that any “bought Servant, or Negro, or Mulatto slave...be allowed to bear Arms.” Georgia even more direct. Not only were Blacks forbidden from owning or carrying firearms, but white men were required to own “a good gun or pistol” to give them the means to “search and examine all negro houses for offensive weapons and ammunition.” The distinction was clear: “Citizen(s) had the right to keep arms; the slave did not.”¹⁷

The majority of guns owned in the United States are owned by White males who constitute a third of the population. Owning a gun in America has been symbolic of patriotism or even nationalism, hence the possible reasoning for the racial and cultural disparity when it comes to gun ownership. The gun has become a symbol of power, status, and patriotism giving easy lawful access to some and making it more difficult for others to obtain such who seek other means. The underground sales of guns in the urban setting that end up in the hand of Black youth, drug dealers, and gang bangers lead to higher homicide rates and innocent lives lost at rates unseen or heard of in any other

¹⁷ Carol Anderson, *The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 4-5.

communities. The plan is strategic, buy the guns legally in states that have easy access and peddle them in cities that have strict gun laws which has been the case for over the past thirty years. These guns must be traced to the owners and distributors and they need to be held accountable especially when used in homicides. Unfortunately, this has been nothing but talk within the executive and legislative branches but without any actions to back it up. America's anger is but a fleeting moment when it comes to gun violence and then its "business as usual." Again, gun violence was and is the pandemic before the pandemic and the reinterpretation of the Second Amendment has put more guns in the hands of Americans both legally and illegally. Capitalism has won over the right to live, and the results have been nearly 40,000 lives lost per year.

The Second Amendment on the other hand, is fundamentally different. It was designated and has consistently been constructed to keep African Americans powerless and vulnerable. Regardless of the court's stance, there is no clear pathway to human rights where the Second Amendment is concerned. A series of legal decisions best illustrate this point. In *Lewis v. the United States* (1980), citing the need for public safety, felons were stripped of the right to bear arms. The ruling, of course fell disproportionately on African Americans, because an unequal justice system had unnaturally created mass incarceration and imprisoned the Black community. Meanwhile, African Americans in Chicago and Washington D.C. had faced staggering gun violence and record homicides, and responded with statutes to reduce the number of firearms in their cities. But they soon ran headlong into NRA-backed Supreme Court decisions that interpreted that gun control as violating the individual's right to bear arms. Guns would once again legally flood those cities. Similarly, state laws that banned firearms in public housing in order to provide for the security of the residents have also been overturned. Each of these — restricting felons from possessing guns, while also allowing a greater flow in urban areas for "protection" against crime, and forbidding firearms in public housing — had at its center the argument of "safety" and "security." But they had something else in common, too: African Americans were always the ones who bore the brunt of the decision.¹⁸

¹⁸ Anderson, 6-7.

Another major part of the problem that attributes to the violence that can break out anytime, anywhere, has to do with States that are allowed their own rights to determine gun laws. Although there are common federal requirements that stretch across the states, each state is allowed to make its own laws in addition to what the Federal requires. Thus, “Stand Your Ground” and “citizen’s arrest” state laws trap minorities in a system whereas shootings are justifiable and the perpetrators walk.

Law Minus Accountability Equals Death and Injustice

Treyvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American male with big dreams as all teenagers have of success and greatness, was returning to his father’s home one rainy night in Sanford, Florida with skittles and an ice tea. Little did he know that he would be the target of a racist white male who called himself the “community watch.” George Zimmerman followed him, assuming that he didn’t belong there and was up to no good, labelled him a thief, a trouble maker, an outsider who had no business in his white America. On that sad rainy night, Treyvon’s dreams would be shattered and his parent’s hopes would be turned into a nightmare in an America where one is judged by the color of one’s skin as opposed to the content of one’s character. The night would end in tragedy when this young man’s body would lay out in the rain while the White man would be released to go home after an unjustified homicide.

Florida was the first state to pass a stand-your-ground law, and a national controversy erupted after teenage Treyvon Martin was shot dead by George Zimmerman on the night of February 26, 2012, in Sanford, a small city in Central Florida. Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old high school student, was walking home from the store in a gated community when he was tracked down and after an altercation, shot to death by Zimmerman, who was acting as a volunteer neighborhood watchman. The local police initially released Zimmerman, but after a broad public outcry, he was charged and tried for Martin’s death. On July 13, 2013, a six-person jury acquitted Zimmerman of second-degree murder and of manslaughter. Though he did not invoke the stand-your-ground-law in response to

criminal charges, the trial focused on possible interactions between Zimmerman and Martin on the night of the events, and the judge's instructions to the jury echoed the statute's language: "If Zimmerman was not engaged in an unlawful activity, and was attacked in any place where he had a right to be, he had no duty to retreat and had the right to stand his ground and meet force with force, including deadly force if he reasonably believed that it was necessary to do so to prevent death or great bodily harm to himself or another."¹⁹

Zimmerman was acquitted and it is my belief that he got away with murdering Trayvon due to the lack of video coverage, as there was only audio taken from his 911 calls. In listening to the tape, one cannot tell who the aggressor was. Although the dispatcher told Zimmerman not to follow Trayvon, he refused and kept in pursuit. Would Mr. Zimmerman have followed Trayvon had he not had a gun? Would Mr. Zimmerman have pursued Trayvon had he not known that there was a law to protect him if he felt as though he had to fight for his life or risk bodily harm or danger? Highly unlikely, but because the dead tell no testimony, all the jury had to go on was Zimmerman's account of what happened on that tragic night. Zimmerman knew on that tragic night that he would end up putting a bullet in an unarmed, seventeen-year-old African American male with a pack of skittles and an ice tea, and Zimmerman knew that he had every advantage. In memory of Trayvon, on the anniversary of his death, the pastors were asked to wear a hoodie and I stood united with them as I graced the pulpit with my hoodie (see Appendix D: Pictures). This would begin my protest against gun violence.

A Tale of Two Criminal Justice Cases

I received a message from David Greene, a reporter for the *Norwood News*, a local newspaper, asking me my thoughts and opinion on the two verdicts that were

¹⁹ Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss, *The Gun Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 129.

handed down, one pertaining to the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse of shooting three, killing two at a protest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and the guilty verdict of three men, Travis McMichael, Gregory McMichael, and William “Roddie” Bryan Jr. who shot and killed an African-American, Ahmaud Arbery, who was out jogging. Mr. Greene also wanted to know my thoughts and opinion concerning the criminal justice system in relation to minorities and fair treatment. My exact quote concerning his inquiry was,

[T]he two verdicts on last week represent a tale of two criminal justice systems. A system of justice that is often broken when it comes to minorities and yet has potential as we see in the verdict of the killing of Ahmaud Arbery. Self-defense cannot and should not be defined whereas one is the initiator or the aggressor and this is what both cases had in common. The fact that Rittenhouse brought a gun to a protest, shot and killed two people and walked is a travesty of justice!²⁰

The big difference in the Arbery case is the footage of what actually took place by one of the assailants. In the video, everything that took place was laid out in the recording: the chase, the scuffle, and the shooting.

This was not the case in what transpired when Rittenhouse claimed that he had no choice but to fire as he felt that his life was being threatened. This young man took it upon himself to show up at a protest, where he was brandishing an assault rifle, which meant that he went there anticipating and possibly looking for trouble. Rittenhouse has now become a “hero” after his acquittal of all charges and is likened to a vigilante. I cannot help but liken this back to the eighties in New York City, where a man named Bernhard Goetz, after being mugged time and again, decided to purchase a gun and opened fire on four youth on a subway during an attempted mugging.

²⁰ David Greene, “Inquiring Photographer: Thoughts on People’s Faith in the Justice System,” *Norwood News*, December 2, 2021, <https://www.norwoodnews.org/inquiring-photographer-thoughts-on-peoples-faith-in-the-justice-system/#.Yf1Lj98lljA.mailto> (accessed February 4, 2022).

Bernhard Goetz is best known for his moniker “the Subway Vigilante.” Following an assault in 1981, Goetz was infuriated by the lack of prosecution of the three assailants. He decided to start carrying a gun for protection. In 1984, four teenagers approached Goetz again, but this time Goetz shot all four, permanently paralyzing one of them, Darrell Cabey. The case made him a folk hero to some New Yorkers who believed his actions were justified. In the criminal trial, Goetz was acquitted of attempted murder, but was found guilty of illegal firearms possession. Later, the jury in a civil trial awarded Cabey millions in damages. Goetz then declared bankruptcy.²¹

Although neither the 2nd Amendment nor “Stand Your Ground” laws allow a person to take the law into their own hands, the three men that ran Arbery down in the Georgia case tried to hide under a law that allows a person to make a “citizen’s arrest” if there is proof or suspicion that a crime has taken place. Again, it was the video proof, as was the case in the George Floyd homicide that would be the deciding factor. African Americans still sit on edge due to the “ghosts” of the past, while police and others are acquitted despite videotaped evidence, e.g., Rodney King.

It is no wonder that the right to bear arms has become more of a political issue in recent years as the federal government’s policies through the Gun Control Act and Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act have done very little in preventing handguns from getting in the wrong hands with the late Justice Scalia’s opinion on these acts added insult to injury.

The volatile sales cycles are self-evidently driven by politics. Peak sales in 1968 and 1993 coincided respectively with enactment of the Gun Control Act and the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, both of which substantially tightened federal regulations of firearms commerce. More recently, firearms sales increased sharply beginning in 2006, when a Democratic majority was elected to both houses of Congress, and continued sharply upward through President Obama’s two terms. Gun owners were encouraged by pro-gun propaganda to believe that the

²¹ Biography, “Bernhard Goetz,” <https://www.biography.com/crime-figure/bernhard-goetz> (accessed January 24, 2022).

Democrats, and especially Obama, would take away their guns or at least make it more difficult to obtain the kind of gun they wanted. The irony is that nothing actually happened at the federal level; during Obama's first term the only change in gun policy was to remove the ban on carrying loaded guns in national parks and transporting checked firearms on Amtrak.²²

It is our own selfish desires that have led Americans to arm themselves with guns, the same selfish desire that the Apostle Paul outlines in Romans 8:3, 4. The right to bear arms is signified with the right to be judge, jury, and executioner. The right to bear arms is signified with power over as opposed to power under. Self-defense is a farce as very few cases fall under a life or death situation for the so called victim(s). American citizens must challenge the courts to re-evaluate the decisions that have changed the true meaning of what the forefathers were declaring the 2nd Amendment to be, such as "Stand Your Ground" that put lives in jeopardy, particularly Black lives, with its shoot first and we will figure it out later approach. The federal and state governments have to come to a mutual agreement in setting forth standards that will make it harder for guns to end up in the wrong hands; we can no longer allow law without order, law without accountability, and law without justice. Gun violence is a growing trend in this country—whether mass shootings, school shooting, or hood shootings—and this was and is the pandemic before the pandemic. It's time to stop talking about it and start acting on it because not only do our lives depend on it, the future of our children's lives depends on it.... the time is now!

²² Cook and Goss, *The Gun Debate*, 76, 77.

CHAPTER 5

THE EFFECTS OF GUN VIOLENCE ON THE COMMUNITY

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”
(Luke 10:29 NIV)

When the pandemic first hit, one of the responses across the United States was an increase in gun sales. Why were Americans arming themselves as never before in her history? Were Americans going on the defensive to protect their property and families in anticipation of an increase in illegal behavior, or arming themselves in anticipation of a civil war between the haves and the have nots or different races/cultures? The majority of gun owners are White males that own approximately 50% of the guns according to purchases. The increase in gun ownership from 2020 has also brought about an increase in gun violence with suicide still the primary result and homicide coming in second. If gun violence was a major issue prior to the pandemic, with the rise of Covid-19 things have drastically worsened.

CNN reported that there were 233 killed in over 500 shootings in the United States over the July 4th weekend.²³ The news anchor went on to list the statistics of shootings for the year to date which were 336 mass shootings, 367 people killed and 1,401 people injured. The violence that our communities have suffered and continue to suffer led Governor Andrew Cuomo (NY) to declare a state of emergency in order to

²³ Emma Tucker, Omar Jimenez and Kristina Sgueglia, “More than 230 people fatally shot in shootings over the Fourth of July weekend,” CNN, July 7, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/05/us/us-shootings-july-fourth-weekend/index.html>.

direct millions of dollars in a push toward fighting what is becoming a war against gun violence. The former Governor of New York signed an executive order as the state witnessed fifty-one shootings over the weekend and was quoted as saying, “If you look at the recent numbers, more people are now dying from gun violence and crime than COVID. This is a national problem because our future depends on it.” The strategy will generate 138 million dollars for prevention and intervention programs.²⁴

The former Governor’s plan was to target hotspots where gun violence numbers are high, provide services for at-risk youth, improve police and community relations, keep guns away from dangerous people and illegal guns off the streets. It was also during the month of July 2021 that clergy, nonprofits, and government officials met at New Settlement Community Center to discuss the agenda concerning the state of emergency and how we can work together to make a difference and impact in reducing gun violence. There were meetings held in every borough and I was honored to be invited as one of the chosen sitting around the table and sharing ideas and receiving critical information.

The effects of gun violence are taking a toll on our society, financially, psychologically, and physically in all aspects. We are losing too many men, women, and children to this cancer that we have allowed to fester as a result of the Supreme Court’s overturning and changing the laws along with lobby groups, such as the National Rifle Association. Our society has been susceptible to this violence in our schools, shopping malls, church houses, clubs, places of employment, and more recently even the golf

²⁴ Derek Major, “Gov. Cuomo Signs Executive Order Declaring Gun Violence a Disaster Emergency in New York,” *Black Enterprise*, July 7, 2021, <https://www.blackenterprise.com/gov-cuomo-signs-executive-order-declaring-gun-violence-a-disaster-emergency-in-new-york> (accessed February 4, 2022).

courses. Gun advocacy and gun reform has become a major part of the political agenda which former President Donald J. Trump used as a basis for “white fright,” stressing that the Democrats and those on the left want to change gun rights to the point of making them less accessible. Thus, our nation is suffering from the lack of gun reform and the refusal to recognize that there are too many guns in America, too many guns in the wrong hands, leaving us clueless as to where and how to begin in addressing the problem/issue. This will lead to more blood being shed and more lives being lost unless America takes drastic and immediate actions, where it says “enough is enough” and moves toward reforms despite gun rights freedoms.

Jesus, in the Gospel of Luke 10:25-37, when confronted by a rich young ruler as to what could he do to obtain everlasting life, told him a parable that has popularly become known as the Good Samaritan. The rich young ruler wanted to know just who is/was his neighbor that he is mandated to love. Just like the rich young ruler then, we as a society still do not recognize our neighbor(s) and this certainly goes deeper than the person, family, or people that live next door to us. Truth be told, we don’t even know the ones that live next door to us anymore. Jesus, through the parable, enlightens us that our neighbors are the ones that don’t look or talk the way that we do; our neighbors are the ones that don’t practice or believe in the same practices that we profess; our neighbors are the poor, the needy, the widow, and the fatherless. We’ve failed to love our neighbors but have armed ourselves just like the thieves on the Jericho road who beat and robbed the man who travelled that way and left him for dead. We’ve failed to love our neighbors just like the priest and the Levite that passed that way, saw the man and kept it moving.

We've failed to love our neighbors, yet we've replaced our love with guns, with bullets, and with our own self-love and selfishness.

School Shootings

But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for such is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:14 KJV).

I started working at the Mount Pleasant Cottage School in October 2016 as a Teacher's Aide. The school sits on a campus that houses most of the children from K-12th grade who reside on JCCA's campus in Pleasantville, NY. There are a few kids that are day students or who are bussed in from both up and downstate. Most of the children are wards of the state either through the Administration of Children's Services or the Department of Probation who have emotional, psychological, and mental disorders that range from ADHD, autism, to bi-polar/schizophrenia which warrants for most of them IEPs along with medication which is attached to the diagnosis. Within the school, which is one of two, are metal detectors, and school safety monitors who use wands to determine whether those students that enter are carrying weapons. Every school day students are checked, and if this isn't enough, drills are practiced — some nonemergency, some of real concern, known as shelter in place, lockout, and lockdown. In the case of shelter in place there is no movement about the building and people are to remain wherever they are. In the case of lockdown students and teachers are to remain where they are with lights off, shades down, all in one area of the classroom and there is no talking or movement around the classroom. All that I have mentioned are the results of school shootings which have become ever so prevalent in America.

Gary Younge, in *Another Day in the Death of America*, chronicles the lives of ten young males from ages nine to nineteen that succumbed to gun violence in one day

(November 23, 2013) across the United States. However, he noted in his introduction, the shootings that average about seven youth a day, do not get the same attention as mass shootings that have occurred in schools, and yet individual shootings on a daily basis are just as significant:

Less than a year before the day on which this book is set, a troubled twenty-one-year-old, Adam Lanza, shot his mother then drove to Sandy Hook Elementary School and shot twenty small children and six adult staff members dead before turning the gun on himself. Even though mass shootings comprise a small proportion of gun violence in any year, they disturb America's self-image and provoke its conscience in a way that the daily torrent of gun deaths does not.

"Individual deaths don't have the same impact and ability to galvanize people because mass shootings are public spectacles," *New York Times* journalist Joe Nocera told me. "They create a community of grief. So, it stands to reason that Newtown would be the thing that wakes people up.... I was galvanized by Sandy Hook."

Sandy Hook's political impact was not solely about the numbers. It was also about the victims' ages. Most of the victims were first graders — aged six and seven. It was the pathos of hearing how Lanza picked them off one by one, how they cowered in bathrooms and teachers hid them in closets. These facts forced a reckoning with what could and should be done to challenge this ever happening again. "Seeing the massacre of so many innocent children...it's changed America," said West Virginia's Democratic senator, Joe Manchin, who championed a tepid gun control bill that would not even come to a vote in the Senate. "We've never seen this happen."

The truth is it's happening every day. Only most do not see it. November 23, 2013, was one of those days.²⁵

There are no doubts that school shootings have resulted in safety measures, such as metal detectors and bag screenings for weapons that have made our academic institutions resemble prisons.

²⁵ Gary Younge, *Another Day in the Death of America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), ix.

Unfortunately, we live in a country that values capital over lives. The shooting that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary is a prime example of this where the U.S. government could have acted, but it didn't, as noted by Thomas Gabor in *Confronting Gun Violence in America*:

The power of the lobby was illustrated in the aftermath of the mass murder in December 2012 of 20 school children and 6 staff members of Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut. Even on the heels of such a horrific incident, Congress failed to pass a law that would have expanded background checks to all gun sales, including private sales through the internet and gun shows.²⁶

If the government's failure to act wasn't bad enough, the National Rifle Association's response was even worse. Following the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, the NRA called for the arming of school personnel as their primary response to such incidents. Bans on assault style-guns, limits on high capacity magazines, and even universal background checks were dismissed by the NRA as ineffective and a violations of owners' Second Amendment rights. The NRA's vision for America seems to be the arming of the entire population as well as the use of armed guards to secure "soft" targets, such as schools, shopping malls, and movie theaters.²⁷ The solution for the NRA is to turn America into the Wild Wild West by arming everybody—money and profits over lives, then hiding behind the 2nd Amendment—because they refuse accountability. In the meantime, illegal gun sales occur, assault weapons sales increase, without the extensive background checks that

²⁶ Thomas Gabor, *Confronting Gun Violence in America* (Lake Worth, FL: Palgrave McMillian, 2016), 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

might just prove that there are people who have guns and will purchase guns who are unfit to carry.

America has suffered at least ten mass school shootings from the mid-sixties up until now. Before Sandy Hook there was the shooting that took place at Columbine.

Joseph Kolb, author of *Teen Violence in America: How Do We Save Our Children?*, says:

On April 20, 1999 the sanctity of American schools was changed forever. On that cool and breezy Tuesday morning, two students arrived at the school shortly after 11 AM, curiously wearing full length trench coats. Eighteen-year-old Eric Harris and seventeen-year-old Dylan Klebold methodically proceeded through Columbine High School, an affluent and quiet Denver suburb, and began systematically shooting an arsenal of weaponry at students and staff. When the shooting was ended, there were twelve students and one teacher dead, and twenty-one wounded. As law enforcement closed in to try and quell the carnage, the two each fired a single bullet into their heads, ending their own lives in the same methodical way they had carried out the well-planned massacre.²⁸

Mental illness has played a major role in school shootings and perhaps many of the mass shootings. Such was the case in the Columbine massacre that was carried out by Harris and Klebold. School shootings are the dramas that occur from unresolved traumas and mental illnesses:

There were numerous warning signs both at home and at school that should have sparked concern but were ignored. Harris and Klebold had expressed admiration for the likes of Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson in school assignments. Peter Langman, Ph.D. writes in a blog entry for Psychology Today.com examining the psyche of Harris and Klebold that the mass casualty incident was not merely a by-product of bullying, since both perpetrators had bullied others students themselves; it is indisputable that Harris was taking an anti-depressant Luvox and had anger issues; the duo had even videoed themselves displaying weapons and explosive devices they intended to use at school that fateful day. No one connected

²⁸ Joseph Kolb, *Teen Violence In America: How Do We Save Our Children?* (Hobart, NY: Hatherleigh Press, 2019), 77.

the dots, and the result was the school and the nation at large paid the deadly price of ignorance.²⁹

Kolb also notes the need for necessary counseling to accompany the treatment of medication prescribed by family practitioners and pediatricians with no such follow up service. In addition to mental illnesses, easy accessibility to firearms (whether purchased legally or illegally by the perpetrators), the negligence of parents in not keeping their weapons under key or a recognition code in order to discharge such weapons has also played a major part in the rise of gun violence.

There is no doubt that gun violence puts our children under attack and even schools, which should be safe havens of higher learning are now far from it. Children, particularly in America, are suffering from the physical and mental anguish brought about by gun violence. Jesus said bring the children to me and somehow either the enemy has blocked the children from getting to Jesus or we have failed in bringing them. Jesus' disciples tried to block the children from getting to the King of kings and Lord of lords, yet the parents made every effort to bring them. Prayer was taken out of the schools, yet the pledge of allegiance remains. Prayer was taken out of school, yet guns found their way inside. Prayer was taken out of school, but bullies and gangs have emerged holding our children hostage. Yes, our children are suffering and whenever God is disregarded, expelled, or dismissed not only do our children suffer, we all suffer.

Community Shootings

“Nazareth!” exclaimed Nathaniel. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” “Come and see for yourself,” Phillip replied. (John 1:46 NLV).

²⁹ Ibid., 78.

On October 30, 2021 my wife and I took our four-year-old godson, Keyshawn to Chuckie Cheese. The establishment was filled with children running around, playing video games, and eating pizza, wings, and other things that are commonly known as “fast food.” Certainly, a child’s paradise! While chasing our godson from game to game, my wife engaged in conversation with one of the fathers who was there with his children about how expensive it is for games and food fun and he told her that yes, it is expensive but he brings his children there at least once of month because it’s safer than having them play in the park or a playground with bullets flying; so he makes the two-hour sacrifice; he’s good and the children are good. This is the sad reality of parents desperately seeking refuge where their children can be free to run, play, and be carefree without worrying about shots flying. Gary Younge described it like this in reference to a young man he met when raising Black children,

Miller, whom I met at a café in Chicago’s Hyde Park, not far from where the Obamas used to live, explained that Black parents in low-income neighborhoods go to extreme lengths to keep their children safe. It is not simply a matter of setting boundaries, establishing curfews, and making sure they get their homework done. It is about hermetically sealing them from their immediate environment, where the risks are too great to leave anything to chance. “For him, it was that cocoon world,” says Miller, referring to the young intern. “I have a lot of parents and also grandparents who create cocoons for these young people. They transport them everywhere. They don’t get on public transportation. They don’t go out and hang out in the parks. Because it’s just too dangerous.”³⁰

How often have we heard it said, “this type of crime doesn’t happen in this community?” This is to insinuate that the community is a safe, family oriented, loving community in which people look out for one another and shootings are not just rare but nonexistent, and yet we have mass shootings that have taken place in clubs, movie

³⁰ Younge, 65.

theaters, nail salons, shopping malls, work places, on highways, at gas stations, in urban settings, in rural settings, and even in churches, which I will deal with in the next section.

Nowhere is safe in America; gun violence makes everyplace prone to an attack.

Homicides that occur as domestic violence incidents are also on the rise and make the home unsafe for all who live within the walls where a weapon is stored.

According to the Brady campaign there are critical economic costs as well as public health issues surrounding gun violence:

Gun violence is estimated to cost the American economy at least \$229 billion every year. Let that sink in-\$229 billion. In addition to the medical costs of a shooting, indirect expenses take the form of impact on victims' quality of life and victims' lost wages.

Beyond the economic costs, we also see fractured families, neighborhoods, and communities. According to the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), more than 5 percent of America's children have witnessed a shooting. It's time to focus on how repeated exposure to gun violence affects the next generation.

We've heard stories of children in the most impacted communities sleeping in tubs to avoid bullets at night. Mothers under stress are giving birth to babies with lower birth weights. Children can't even go to the library because their streets aren't safe, further putting them at disadvantage in school. And because many of gun violence's root causes: poverty, trauma, and ineffective public safety policies, go hand-in-hand with systemic racism, gun violence has disproportionate impact on Black and Brown communities- and Black and Brown children. ...

Housing Prices And Local Economy

A 2017 report by the Urban Institute shows that higher levels of neighborhood gun violence can be associated with fewer retail and service establishments as well as fewer new jobs. Higher levels of gun violence are associated with lower home values, credit scores, and homeownership rates. As a result, gun violence hurts a community's housing prices and drives residents to relocate from or avoid moving in affected neighborhoods.

Medical Costs

In 2010 alone, 36,000 victims of firearm assaults visited the emergency room, and 25,000 were admitted to the hospital- coming to a total cost of \$630 million in medical treatment. The majority of that price tag — or 52 percent — was charged to taxpayers through publicly funded health insurance, and 28 percent was billed to people who lacked health insurance.

Public Health

Let's call gun violence exactly what it is — an epidemic. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), an overwhelming 87 percent of Americans think gun violence is a public threat, including 77 percent of Republicans and 96 percent of Democrats. In 2016, the American Medical Association (AMA), the country's largest physicians' group, adopted a formal policy calling gun violence "a public health crisis."

It's not hard to understand why. People who are impacted by gun violence may experience stress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The effects of this harm extend not just to survivors but also to witnesses, bystanders, neighbors, and all those who love them.

Living In Fear

Even living under the threat of gun violence affects our health. According to a 2018 study by the Pew Research Center, the majority of U.S. teens fear a shooting could happen at their school, and most parents share their concern. Students of color express a higher level of concern than their white peers.

Everyone has the right to live without the fear of being shot. Where you live shouldn't determine if you live. It's in our hands to end the toll of gun violence in our community.³¹

Gun violence according to the Brady report, has devastating and costly, psychological and physical, short and long term affects which tear down our communities. These affects are more devastating to people of color than other ethnic

³¹ Brady, "Effects of Gun Violence," <https://www.bradyunited.org/issue/effects-of-gun-violence> (accessed January 24, 2022).

groups. The homicide level in urban environments is greater than in the rural environments.

America's homicide rate hit almost 10 per 100,000 in the peak years; it's now about half that. But not for black men. Black men are dying, overwhelmingly by gunshot, at a horrendous pace. In 2005, black men aged eighteen to twenty-four were murdered at a rate of 102 per 100,000 (white men of the same age: 12.2 per 100,000). Recent data show that, even as homicide overall continues to decline, black men are dying more. Between 2000 and 2007, the gun homicide rate for black men aged fourteen to seventeen went up 40 percent; eighteen to twenty-four and over, up almost 27 percent. And it's not just the big cities anymore. It's moving to the small cities, the towns, places that never dreamt they'd be dealing with.³²

It is clearly evident from the statistics given that gun violence in America occurs disproportionately based on environment, ethnicity, economic and social class, yet it still poses a threat throughout the land. Whether due to poverty, mental health, public neglect, crime, domestic violence, or even police brutality the threat is real and it puts every person regardless of race, sex, nationality, or culture at risk of being intentionally or unintentionally cut down by a bullet.

The disciples asked a question when it was spread abroad that Jesus the Messiah had come: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It is a question that we can ask today of any crime ridden urban center whether highly populated or not. Can anything good come out of Chicago, yet there came out an Oprah Winfrey, a Michael Jordan, a Barak Obama. Can anything good come out of Los Angeles, yet there came out a Venus and Serena Williams, a Magic Johnson, and an Arsenio Hall. Can anything good come out of New York City, yet there came out a David Dinkins, an Afrika Bambata, and a Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. just to name a few and although the aforementioned may

³² David M. Kennedy, *Don't Shoot* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 12.

not have been born and raised in these cities, these cities have empowered them to do great things not for just themselves but for others. Yes, there is a lot of good that can come out of Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York along with any other city, even a ghetto like Nazareth that raised the Savior of the world; his name is Jesus!

Lord Break Every Chain Including Police Brutality

He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him (Mark 5:3, 4 ESV).

I grew up in Harlem from the sixties to the eighties. It happened on a hot and sultry day at the age of fifteen. I decide to walk from the West Side to the East further uptown to visit some friends that lived in the Lincoln Housing projects. This was nothing out of the ordinary as I often visited with a few friends that I considered my brothers, and being an only child, we had literally grown up together. But as I approached 132nd Street and Lenox Avenue, heading toward 5th Avenue, an older White male dressed in blue jeans and a t-shirt approached me with his hand to his backside ordering me not to move. I froze in my tracks, and the next thing I knew I was surrounded by police interrogating me as to where I was coming from and why I was there. One officer went as far as to put his hand on my chest, checking my heart rhythms, wanting to know why my heart was beating rapidly. My excuse was obvious; I was being detained by the police! They then went on to explain that a vegetable stand had been robbed on the West Side not too far from where we were and did I mind riding back to where it took place. I had no objections as I knew I had done nothing wrong. While riding in the car I heard a description come over the car radio that the suspect was wearing a red t-shirt and black shorts, and wouldn't you know it, I was wearing a red shirt and black shorts on that day.

My heart began to sink! When we pulled up to where the robbery took place, the car stopped and I sat motionless awaiting my fate. The officers returned to their car and told me I could go, that whoever was robbed stated that it wasn't me. The officers then offered me a ride back to the East side. Needless to say, I declined, got out the car, and got home as rapidly as I could, thanking God for a newly found freedom. Oftentimes I think about that day and shudder reflecting on the "what ifs," like what if I would have turned and run? Would the Detective have taken out his gun, shot and put me down, or what if I was falsely identified by the owner of the vegetable stand and was arrested, taken to jail, and caught up in a criminal justice system, fighting for my freedom or doing time for a crime I had not committed. I repeat, I shudder when I think about the "what ifs." Growing up and being stopped by the police in what is commonly known as the ghetto is nothing rare; I've experienced it and I'm sure there are thousands of others who have experience it with a more hazardous and deadly fate: Eric Garner, Michael Brown, George Floyd, Sandra Blake, Philando Castile, Amidou Diallo, Tamir Rice, Sean Bell, Elijah McClain, and Walter Scott to name a few. When it comes to police shootings and police brutality, it doesn't get co-opted under gun violence and yet it is just as violent as any other type that goes on inside or outside the community. Although I grew up in the "hood," suspecting police, given the history of race relations and incidents which have been portrayed in the media from a "few bad apples," and which have been a poor reflection on law enforcement, I do not believe that the majority are racist or uncaring toward the people they are to "protect and serve." And I definitely am aware that if our communities are to grow into safer flourishing habitats, it cannot and will not be done without the aid and help of the police and law enforcement. The truth is the men and

women behind the badge put their lives on the line every day; they show up to work; they laugh and cry and hurt like we do; and they make mistakes...they are human. But they must also lay aside their personal feelings, their prejudices, and see the humanity of a person and not their color in order to be effective. The prison system has become the new Jim Crow as outlined by author, Michelle Alexander, and at times the police play major roles in entry into this system. The goal of incarceration is supposed to be rehabilitation, but, oftentimes, it is an unending circle in which there are repeat offenders due to failure to find employment, housing, and a community that embraces and assists them in the rehabilitation process once they are set free.

There are three accounts by the Gospel writers which tell the story of the man dwelling in the tombs, crying, streaking, and cutting himself. Although Matthew's gospel tells us there were two men, they all focus on one. If this man was with us today, what would his fate be? If he were a Black man, where would his deliverance come from? Well, three scenarios come to mind, the first being that if he were confronted by the police and prone to the types of behaviors outlined by the writers, he would have been shot and killed. The second scenario is he would have been arrested, tried and convicted to a prison sentence. Upon his release, he is unable to find employment; housing is an issue so he resorts to a shelter; and he becomes so frustrated that he returns to drugs, robbing, stealing and the tombs. The last scenario is that he remains in the state that he is in with no one to come to his rescue until he either commits suicide or pushes someone in front of a train. It doesn't look good for him as a Black man in 2021. David M. Kennedy in his book *Don't Shoot* describes it like this:

America has become a place where one in three black men will serve a felony prison sentence. One in nine between ages twenty and thirty-four is

in a prison *right now*. In Baltimore, where they've done the math, and many other places where they haven't, *half* of all young adult black men are in prison, in jail, on parole, or on probation. Most of those arrested, prosecuted, jailed, imprisoned, on probation, and on parole come from and return to the poor, hot-spot neighborhoods where the drugs, crime, and violence are also worst. In these places, most of the men can have criminal records. Felons, even those committed to turning their lives around, are deeply, permanently damaged. Nearly none will ever get a good job; permanently hobbled from advancement, they have little reason to invest in education and training; they are less likely to marry; they are less able to take care of their loved ones; many of them go to prison with children and families they leave behind and then return to, often to leave behind again, each step of which is profoundly disruptive; they have less to offer their communities; their communities mean less to them. Short of the actual arrest and imprisonment, there is the grinding, intrusive policing endured by many black communities, the kind of policing that saddled Timothy Thomas with his twenty-one violations, the kind of policing that makes citizens in these neighborhoods think, at best, that the police are not on their side, and at worst that they are a race enemy. We are systematically injuring one of America's peoples. And we need to own that this is a *choice* that we are making. Law enforcement is not the tide or the weather. It does not just happen. We are doing this because we have *decided to*.³³

Jesus and Simon Peter

But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers (Luke 22:32 NLT).

Jesus disciple's, Simon Peter, could be described as outspoken or quick with the lip. Peter, like all of us, was a work-in-progress and would have been the one if alive today, you dare not cut off on the highway for fear of road rage. Yes, there was a time when Peter's mouth and his temper got him in trouble; however, Jesus told him that there would come a time when he would be transformed and after his conversion that he should strengthen his brother. Rage can lead to murder, especially where there is a gun involved. Tempers may flare to the point where one retreats and the firearm becomes the end-all of

³³ Kennedy, *Don't Shoot*, 16-17.

heated arguments. Gang members riff with one another and use firearms to settle their disputes and who gets caught up in the gun fire: children and innocent bystanders. Jesus took the time to mentor Simon Peter and had patience with him and it will take this type of mentorship within our communities to help curb the gun violence that holds, especially, our urban environment under siege.

Church Shootings

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18 NIV).

During one of my recent Bible studies, in which we were discussing gun violence and the church, one of our Deaconesses asked me a question pertaining to security, as at one time we were locking our doors during our Sunday telecasts. I explained to those that were in the Zoom room that there are churches taking such precautions, such as hiring armed security; states that have “conceal and carry” where the parishioners and leaders carry their guns to worship; and there was a time when the Deacons who were solely men were the watchmen on the walls. The answer for gun-rights supporters is simply to arm everybody, even when it comes to the church. Michael W. Austin the author of *God and Guns in America* describes it this way:

Gun violence at church, is unfortunately a reality. There were 147 shootings at churches from 2006 to 2016, more than 137 that occurred between 1980 and 2005. In recent years, there have been deadly mass shootings at churches. On June 17, 2005, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist shot and killed nine people at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter was arrested the next day and sentenced to death in January of 2017. He expressed no remorse at his trial. Mike Huckabee claimed that if only someone at the prayer meeting had a concealed-carry permit and was carrying a gun, the shooting could have been prevented, or at least the carnage could have been reduced.

On November 5, 2017, a twenty-six-year-old man entered the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, and killed twenty-six people during a Sunday morning service. A neighbor fired at the shooter as he left the

church; the shooter later died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. In response to this, Texas attorney general Ken Paxton, as well as many pastors, argued that if churchgoers would arm themselves, as allowed by Texas law, then someone could stop a shooter before he does too much harm.

This sort of a response is standard for many gun-rights supporters. The answer to gun violence is more guns. We need more guns in schools, more guns in the workplace, more guns at bars and nightclubs, more guns at the shopping malls, and we need more guns in church. But is this right? The Reverend Michael McBride argues that this “is not the religion of Jesus. I think it is becoming increasingly apparent that we have a practice of blasphemous Christianity by many so-called Christians. Jesus is the Prince of Peace in a world of war. Rather than continue to push for more instruments of death, which are unable to keep us safe, we must rather start to call for a more peaceful existence that limits the proliferations of instruments of death. Any faith leaders that call for the opposite of that...has a deep moral hole in their soul, and they should be ignored.”³⁴

Gun violence as has been referred to as a pandemic that is not limited to the urban setting and effects, and affects different aspects of our communities from schools, to businesses, to shopping malls, to workplaces and even to houses of worship. Peter’s first epistle warns, “Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (I Peter 5:8 NLT); unfortunately, this does not exclude the church.

The church has become a battleground for gun violence as was witnessed in the mass shooting that took place at Mother Emanuel AME in Charleston, SC on June 17, 2015. Dylann Roof entered the church where a little more than ten parishioners were having Bible study and while concluding asked the young man to join them for prayer, yet while talking to God he took out an assault rifle, started shooting, and the carnage

³⁴ Austin, 85.

would leave nine dead, and one wounded. The economic costs of this assault on the church were counted in October 2021.

The families of nine people who died in a racist mass shooting at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., have reached an \$88 million settlement with the Department of Justice., after accusing federal agencies of failing to prevent convicted shooter Dylan Roof from buying a gun. The settlement also included money for people who survived the shooting. Survivors and families who lost loved ones in June 2015 attack filed a lawsuit against the Justice Department, saying that the FBI's negligence allowed Roof to buy the gun he used in the attack. At the time, federal law barred Roof from possessing a firearm. The families filed their lawsuit in 2016.³⁵

As sad as this is and was, somewhere in the future we knew that not only it could happen, but it would happen again. Perhaps not church but a synagogue, and it did happen again.

On October 27, 2018, a domestic terrorist murdered 11 Jews during Shabbat services at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. This was both the worst Anti-Semitic attack in America's history and the 12th shooting massacre at an American house of worship in 3 years. Too much blood has spilled, killing upwards of 30,000 Americans every year. The Pittsburgh Shooting Massacre was both Jewish trauma and American blasphemy.³⁶

In lieu of the aforementioned shooting, Jews responded through their writings on the event that took place which is also a reflection in remembrance of what occurred and the lives lost, and which a portion of the proceeds from the sales would go toward efforts to end the American Gun Violence epidemic. The voices are a collection of teens, rabbis, and others from Tree of Life Synagogue community and beyond and was edited by Rabbi

³⁵ Bill Chappell, "Families in Charleston Church Massacre Reach \$88 M Settlement," *NPR*, October 28, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/28/1050035997/charleston-church-shooting-doj-settlement-families> (accessed January 24, 2022).

³⁶ Rabbi Menachem Creditor, *Holding Fast: Jews Respond to American Gun Violence* (New York: Menachem Creditor, 2018), 9.

Menachem Creditor. Here are some of the cries from our Jewish brothers and sisters in relation to that horrendous attack on their synagogue:

I want to know something. Doesn't the "Right to live" supersede the "right to bear arms?" Isn't there something more important than guns? Isn't there something more fundamental than the caliber of the bullet? Isn't there something more precious than the rate of fire? Doesn't the "Right to live" trump all other rights? To paraphrase the verse from Genesis, from the story of Cain and Abel, "the blood of the children, the blood of their adult defenders screams out to Me from the ground." It is to them, the dead, to our children, the living, that the answers must be given. (Rabbi Gary S. Creditor, *The Blood of the Children Cries Out from the Ground!*)³⁷

A few days after the attack, the Rev. Eric S.C. Manning, the leader of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston S.C., where nine parishioners were murdered in 2015, paid a *shiva* call to Pittsburgh, where he embraced the Rabbi Jeffrey Myers of the Tree of Life congregation. Their shared grief moved us all, but at the same time it brought attention to one aspect of the two cases that wasn't shared.

Following the Charleston attack, the victims' families famously forgave the murderer as he stood before them in court. By contrast, as *The New York Times* reported, the Jews of Pittsburgh had no intentions of being so forgiving. The *Times* article states that the Jews interviewed said they had been too busy burying the dead and trekking from *shiva* to *shiva* to devote much thought to the killer. It then adds, "*But Jewish theologians also explained that their tradition, rooted more in the retributive justice of the Old Testament than the turn-the-cheek ethos of the New Testament, take a different approach to forgiveness.*"

Yes, it's true, Judaism does take a different approach. The article goes on to explain, correctly, that the Jewish concept of *teshuva* calls on the perpetrator to seek forgiveness from the victim before having any hope of absolution. Then it adds that Pittsburgh mourners "felt little instinct to forgive the person responsible for the horror." (Rabbi Joshua Hammerman, *Looking Evil in the Eye*)³⁸

It is frightening to live in a country where such hate exists and can be acted upon. It has been happening to many groups — to different faith groups, to various ethnicities. We can draw a line from the shooting in the Charleston church to Sutherland Springs, Texas to Pittsburgh.

³⁷ Creditor, *Holding Fast*, 70.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

Unlike other faiths who did not stand by their Jewish sisters and brothers, today, we have received cards, letters, calls and texts from all different faith groups — Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Christian, Unitarians, Muslims, Hindus — that they are proud to stand with us at this time means the world to us and makes this a moment to build bridges, even stronger bridges, between our communities. (Rabbi David Lerner, Remarks at a Boston Vigil in Solidarity with the Tree of Life Synagogue)³⁹

This Hanukkah I'm thankful that my father is alive. I am thankful that at the moment he heard the gunshots, his instincts told him to shield himself and others in a closet he didn't even know existed. This Hanukkah I finally understand what miracles look like. (Yael Perlman, *How to End Gun Violence: Organize*)⁴⁰

As I look into my newborn daughter's eyes, I see the gift of new life she has already brought so much light and vitality. A Hanukkah blessing for our entire family. I know that while her body is fragile, she has an inner strength. We are fragile after Pittsburgh, yet we have inner strength. Our love for Judaism only deepens after someone tries to scare us. My love for my daughter only increased after being scared by her early birth. Let us always remember that love is stronger than hate. Those who seek to destroy who we are will only make us stronger. (Rabbi Ben Herman, *A Tree of Life*)⁴¹

These are just a few reflections of the Jewish community that are vividly pictured in this book in which gun violence is not limited to race, faith, culture, age, sex, occupation or any other category for that matter.

Jesus tells Peter in the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew that the church or the "ecclesia" will be involved in spiritual warfare and Christ assures Peter that the gates of Hell will not prevail against the church. Gun violence is one of the ways the gates are attacking the church, and not just the church but people of all faiths are under attack. Again, the gates of Hell will not prevail against the church! What will it take? It

³⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

will take a united front of different cultures, various denominations and faiths supporting, collaborating, and fighting against “the gates.” It’s going to take the same support that Mother Emanuel AME gave to Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the realization that we are all in this together and if we not only pray together, but put our heads together we can find solutions and push to change laws in this country, TOGETHER. It will and can only happen if we are TOGETHER, we must bind and loose TOGETHER for the victory has already been prophesied!

CHAPTER 6

BUILDING AWARENESS OF GUN VIOLENCE

The Roman officer and the other soldiers at the crucifixion were terrified by the earthquake and all that had happened. They said, "This man truly was the Son of God!"
(Matthew 27:25 NLT)

A large part of my action dissertation was to raise clergy and church awareness to the importance of gun violence and its effects on the communities in which it is so prevalent. I intended to create a tool of educating clergy and others through (1) a clergy breakfast at New Tabernacle; (2) a teaching/preaching series; and (3) workshops/seminars in collaboration with various nonprofits who are specifically addressing the issue and are on the front lines of combating gun violence.

Unfortunately, I was unable to host a clergy breakfast due to Covid-19 restrictions on gathering, but I was able to conduct a preaching/teaching series during the month of June 2020 and 2021, along with organizing a couple of seminars via Zoom to increase awareness of the plague and inform those who want to be a part of the solution. On July 1, 2020, Reverend Hiram Ratliff collaborated with the GodSquad under the CEO, Pastor Gil Morose, as he hosted a Gun Violence forum as June was Gun Violence Awareness Month. Reverend Ratliff reached out to Pastor Gil Monrose in June to collaborate with him on this event which included flyers advertising this event. There were approximately 200 clergy that participated and Reverend Ratliff helped get the word out through advertisement and word of mouth. Pastor Gil Monrose had politicians, such as Public

Advocate Jermaine Williams, and Senator Chuck Schumer, address clergy on the job that they are doing in trying to address the pandemic of gun violence.

On October 5, 2020, Reverend Hiram Ratliff did the invocation prayer at the Anti-Violence Town Hall and Reentry/Resource Fair in the Bronx which was sponsored by the 48th Precinct along with Darcel Clark of the Bronx District Attorney's Office. The video was attached to Facebook and was seen or witnessed by close to 300 people.

On April 3, 2021, Reverend Hiram Ratliff, the Assistant Director of Kingdom Destiny Fellowship's Social Justice Ministry in the Northeast and in training as an Overseer in the same organization moderated a Gun Violence Summit with Kingdom Destiny Fellowship International via Zoom. Ratliff organized this through KDFI, and invited special guests Pastor Gil Monroe, CEO of the GodSquad in Brooklyn NY, Pastor Jay Gooding and Minister Kwame Thompson from Stand Up to Violence (Jacobi Hospital), and Rev. Dr. Lorin Russell of Matters of Faith. These guests work for various nonprofits that deal with helping curb gun violence. There were over fifty pastors across the United States that were on the Zoom summit along with the Presiding Prelate, Bishop Derrick Robinson. Valuable information was shared from ranging from church leaders occupying the streets to lobbying for gun reform to the need for and money being granted for social service programs that will help keep youth off the streets and gun buyback programs. Not only was information exchanged on what pastors and churches can do to help curb gun violence, but collaborations were also made between guest and various pastors. Successful buyback programs were highlighted in major news articles (see Appendix G: Buyback Articles).

During the month of June, Reverend Ratliff wore t-shirts that witnessed to the need for gun violence reform. Pictures were taken after service displaying the message bringing awareness to the issue at hand and were then advertised through social media, Facebook and Instagram pages. Reverend Ratliff designed a t-shirt and apparel based on his hashtag #TheSwordNotTheGun. Throughout the month, Ratliff posted messages on Facebook including the aforementioned hashtag, bringing awareness to the increasing gun violence that plagues the urban setting. With the assistance of the site-team, Ratliff created a one-page survey for clergy to assess their participation, ministries, etc., in relation to gun violence. The document was sent by clergy and layperson outlining various ideas for ministry of which clergy can take advantage.

On June 12, Ratliff participated in a Gun Violence Peace March in Harlem, hosted by Bethel Gospel Assembly, along with various clergy and nonprofits that address this particular violence. The March began at 142 St. and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd and ended at the State Building in Harlem. Ratliff addressed the community and prayed for Harlem and other urban communities affected at the State building.

Next, he preached from Ephesians 6:10-18 during outdoor worship and praise service at New Tabernacle. The topic was “Stand Your Ground” and subtopic was “Armed and Dangerous.” Ratliff spoke to the community about the rise in gun violence and the need for Church, community, and law enforcement collaborating to solve this ongoing and increasing problem. Reverend Ratliff also addressed police brutality and stated that racism is a heart issue and if the heart does not change training will not help. He encouraged the Church to stand its ground with the whole armor of God, and when it puts on this armor it will not just stand, but stand armed and dangerous.

A week later, Reverend Ratliff moderated a Gun Violence Awareness Summit for the Baptist Evening Conference of NY and Vicinity under the direction and leadership of Rev. Dr. Helen Wingate. The guest panelists were Pastor Jay Gooding (Stand Up To Violence), Pastor Gilford Monroe (The GodSquad, 67th Clergy Council), and Rev. Dr. Alfonso Wyatt (Strategic Destiny: Designing Futures Through Faith And Facts). Panelists shared their expertise concerning how clergy can strategize in combating gun violence and their own personal experience in working for nonprofits which are on the frontlines of confronting such violence. There were over fifty participants, both clergy and laity, who participated and shared in the conversation on the issue of gun violence that is plaguing our communities. The conference will move forward by inviting panelists to a church to speak with clergy and train them in particular actions to effect changes in the communities in which they serve.

On July 21, 2021, Ratliff attended a meeting for clergy and various nonprofits that combat gun violence sponsored by the New York State in reference to Governor Cuomo's Executive Order. This meeting took place at New Settlement Center in the Bronx, NY, and addressed the need for funding for services that will offer services to youth/young adults, such as employment and recreational activities. During the breakout session for clergy, Ratliff emphasized the need to invite young people to the table to hear what they want, and the need for a conflict resolution curriculum that can be taught in schools that will offer teens, children, and young adults another alternative to violence.

On November 14, 2021, a photo shoot was held at the New Tabernacle Baptist Church with t-shirts designed by Reverend Ratliff, which stated, "The Sword Not the Gun" (Ephesians 6:17). In my writing, I examined this statement in relation to what I

imagined the response of Powell would have been. On Thanksgiving, Reverend Ratliff posted the pictures from the photo shoot on Instagram and Facebook requesting prayer for those families that lost members to gun violence.

Everything was to make clergy and the church aware of the need to take actions against the increase in gun violence. I liken this critical awareness to the Roman soldier's testimony of the crucifixion of Christ on the cross. The earthquake, the darkness, the resurrection of others on that Friday opened the centurion's eyes to who Jesus is and led to the confession, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" It is only when we see Jesus as he truly is that we can then make a difference in the world and fight the demons, such as gun violence that has run rampant throughout the United States.

Recruitment for Writing

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:18-20 NIV).

The recruitment process of writing this action dissertation would be crucial to the overall outcome, and as my site-team and I came together in March 2021, we outlined certain skills and criteria for those that would be writing the pieces that ministries could be built upon. We chose a fellow parishioner that is employed by the New York City Police Department whom I have used in the ministry to create workshops for our youth, and who chose to remain anonymous due to his present position as a detective. We chose two pastors, one of whom works for a nonprofit with Jacobi Hospital that specifically addresses gun violence and who had a gun buyback day at his church that made the news. We also chose two Associate Ministers who offered ideas for eulogies to address families and communities that fall prey to gun violence and other ideas on how clergy can

collaborate with law enforcement and their local precincts to assist in fighting gun violence. Finally, we chose three ministers from United Missionary Baptist Association, one pastor from the Church of God in Christ, and one law enforcement officer to put together this crucial piece which would be emailed to clergy once they completed a two question survey. These were chosen because of my familiarity with the work that they do and have done and they gladly accepted. They were asked to attach a bio with their written pieces and received a fifty-dollar stipend for their time and effort.

The writing piece would also include a section on trauma and the effects that gun violence has on the community and information concerning a free online course offered by Johns Hopkins University on Gun Violence Reduction. It was our intentions to give clergy a wealth of information to assist in developing ministries in their churches to combat the shootings and homicides that go on outside their churches' front doors.

As Jesus' recruitment of his disciples was strategic in turning the world right side up, developing this writing piece would take men and women who are committed to the cause, concerned about community, and dedicated to making an impact and a difference. I am proud to say we recruited those whose expertise as well as experience was a true reflection of their dedication to the cause, which added great value to the writing piece. When Christ called his disciples to follow him most of them were already doing something, at work like Peter and Andrew who were fisherman. In the same way, the site-team and I found men and women who were already at work doing something to combat the demons of violence that plague our inners cities and beyond.

Assessment by Clergy

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body (1 Corinthians 11:28, 29 KJV).

Writing to the Corinthian church concerning the Lord's Supper, the Apostle Paul stressed the importance of spiritual self-examination before partaking. I believe in the importance of examining oneself spiritually, especially in the roles that we play in ministry. As a pastor, I have had to evaluate what it is that I am called to do from preaching/teaching to outreach; examining ministries, both old and new, and making changes whenever necessary. There is an accountability and consequences for doing it our way and not God's way that is witnessed in our participation in the partaking of the Lord's Supper. Part of the challenge to clergy is to do an assessment of the ministries in their churches to evaluate whether or not their ministries address the issue of gun violence and, if not what are they willing to implement in reference to ministries that will. I am calling clergy on the carpet to address this issue or continue doing nothing as if the problem does not exist.

The site-team and I created a two question survey for clergy to complete (see Appendix H: Clergy Assessment Survey). The first question was "Does the church where you worship have anything in place to address gun violence?" The choices were: youth workshops; counseling for individuals/families; collaborations with nonprofits, law enforcement, other churches; sermons/teaching series; gun buyback; none of the above. The second question was "What are you willing to do or implement in your church to address the Gun Violence in the community?" The choices were: take a free gun violence awareness course; sermon/teaching series; youth workshops; gun buyback day;

collaborations with others; none of the above; other. Once the survey was completed and clergy entered their email address, the written piece was emailed to him/her with a thank you note. The survey was completed along with its results through Monkey Survey. The survey assessment was displayed through social media on my Facebook page, Instagram, and sent directly to clergy with whom I am familiar, in an effort to reach as many pastors, preachers, teachers, and clergy (specifically of United Baptist Ministers Association but not limited to Baptists).

Action by Clergy

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead (James 2:26 ESV).

The Bible clearly informs the believer that it is not enough to have faith and belief in God, but every believer is compelled to go further and put their faith into action. It is my prayer that this work, this writing piece will awaken a sleeping giant and push out faith into action. The second part of the survey challenges clergy to act in one way or another, for clergy to be honest and put into practice ministries that will address the gun violence that plagues our communities.

Awareness and assessment will hopefully move clergy to action by taking a free online course, collaborating with nonprofits/law enforcement, workshops for youth/young adults, etc., etc. The ongoing part of this dissertation will determine whether or not clergy will stand up and move toward effective action(s) to bring about change as a matter of life or death. James stated that faith without works is dead and he is right; they are not only dead to the believer, but are also dead to everyone else he/she comes into contact with. The time for clergy to act is now!!!

CHAPTER 7 EVALUATION PROCESS

The most effective evaluation process in determining the success of my Demonstration Project, which focuses on the awareness of gun violence, is the production of an educational curriculum for gun violence, and the concrete action to eradicate gun violence in the community by UMBA pastors/churches and New Tabernacle Baptist Church.

METHOD 1: CLERGY CONSULTATION/PREACHING

A clergy consultation was held on June 2020 at New Tabernacle Baptist Church to bring together UMBA clergy, build awareness of gun violence, and move clergy do more about the senseless gun violence that occurs in our communities that will move them to a form of action. A questionnaire was distributed to determine their interest, and examine what type of actions they were willing to take: such as writing educational ministry pieces that can be used in UMBA churches/nonprofits, attending future trainings/workshops to learn more about nonprofits/ministries that are doing the work, and/or a willingness to address the issue of gun violence from the pulpits in which they preach.

Since June is Gun Violence Awareness month, Reverend Ratliff conducted a three-part preaching/teaching series on gun violence and the effects it has on the community, violence in relation to God and the Bible, and issues, such as self-defense. It had been planned to distribute a questionnaire to the congregation to determine what they

learned and the effectiveness of the sermon. A response rate of eighty percent had been anticipated, but the pandemic prevented the congregation from meeting, thus canceling this portion of the proposal.

METHOD 2: CLERGY CURRICULUM TEAM

Several UMBA pastors showed interest in writing a part of the curriculum writing piece. This occurred after interviews conducted by the Site-team and Pastor to determine interests and qualifications at New Tabernacle Baptist Church. The team was formed by end of June 2020 and given to August 2020 to complete writing pieces. The site-team and pastor touched base with the clergy team in July to determine their progress in writing pieces. The educational ministerial pieces were formatted and presented to the UMBA Pastors and churches at the last session in October 2020.

METHOD 3: CLERGY TRAINING/WORKSHOP AND MINISTRY CURRICULUM

A training/workshop was held in June 2020 by various nonprofits that are fighting against gun violence in effort to educate UMBA Pastors and to build collaborations. The gun violence ministerial curriculum was presented and ready for distribution to the UMBA Pastors in October 2020 after careful editing and review.

The Fight, The Faith, And The Finish!

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7).

The action piece, “For Such a Time as This: A Clarion Call to Clergy” was completed by members of the clergy and one parishioner, and was emailed to those who completed the survey with hopes that clergy would be motivated to action by starting ministries to address gun violence.

The fight is what the Church is up against as it relates to gun violence; the faith is what the Church will do and is willing to do to combat the violence; and the conclusion relates to how effective the Church is as it engages in the fight. The results of a survey to clergy indicated how concerned clergy was or wasn't about gun violence, what the leadership was willing to do, and what needs to be done as the Church moves forward. The written piece was completed by May 2021 and the assessment was advertised on Facebook, Instagram and other social media sponsors between June and August 2021.

Check Urself B4 U Wreck Urself!

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them" (Ecclesiastes 12:1 NIV).

I cannot help but highly stress the importance of churches having a strong youth ministry to address the concerns and needs of youth and young adults. I was raised in a church that had such a ministry and tried to build on the youth ministry at the church where I have pastored for over 10 years. Youth ministry is not an easy field to engage in, because young people are trying to discover who they are and deal with the pressures of peers and parents at the same time. Although it may be a difficult field to develop and engage in, I believe it is essential to the life and future of the church. I have noted that youth ministry is also something in which youth and young adults must have input and feel they play active roles in developing what it looks like and how it is carried out. There are churches that not only have youth ministries, but also youth church that is separate from the initial worship that takes place on Sunday. Other churches give youth and young adults a Sunday that is solely theirs to carry out worship and invite their own preachers/teachers to bring forth a Word.

As I previously stated, during my ten years as Pastor of New Tabernacle Baptist Church, I tried to help build the youth ministry through recreational trips, youth revivals, youth and young adult Sundays, and workshops, to name a few. During this time a parishioner who was a New York City Police Officer and is now a Detective (and asked to remain anonymous in adding his writing piece) would run workshops for youth that focused on goal planning pertaining to college, the dangers of what youth share on social media, and what to do or not when stopped by a police officer so that it does not end in a tragedy (see Appendix F: A Clarion Call to Clergy). Thus, the name “Check Urself B4 U Wreck Urself” came into play, and a mentoring piece was added, in which role models, such as authors and former NBA players were invited to speak to the youth (See Appendix D: Pictures).

Ecclesiastes emphasizes the importance of remembering the Creator in the days of our youth because trouble is on the horizon. The Church has to design innovative ways to capture the youth, present the Gospel, and assist in the process of their discovery of who they are and want to be in Christ.

What Do You Say, When You Don’t Know What To Say?

For it is not you who will be speaking- it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you (Matthew 10:20 NIV).

If there is ever an urgent need to lean on the Lord, it is during the eulogy of a teen or young adult that has been tragically taken from the world “too soon.” I have had the sad opportunity to attempt to say something that would bring comfort to a grieving family, grieving teens, and a grieving community whose feelings are scattered and range from anger, depression, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. Young people love hard but

they also grieve hard, especially when it comes to their own. I found myself totally relying on the Spirit to give me the words to say.

Reverend Dundee Holt also shared similar reflections as Youth Minister having to eulogize a family of five that were tragically cut down through gun violence. Reverend Holt outlined in his writing piece not only his feelings of not knowing what to say, but the importance of acknowledging the angry feelings of those who attended the service, enlightening them to the fact that it's okay to have mixed emotions, but also signifying that God loves each and every individual. Reverend Holt and I agree that some of the best texts come from the Psalms (Psalm 23), the Gospels (Luke 4:18), and the Epistles (Ephesians 6:10-18) as they relate to the love of God, but which also provoke people to action.

Jesus told his disciples that a time of great persecution would be coming, and they/we would be brought before magistrates to give an account of the faith. Jesus told them not to worry because the Spirit would give them what was needed to say during this time. Although preaching and teaching to those who have been torn by tragedy and death may not be what he was referring to, I believe it is one of those instances that we, as clergy, have to rely on more than ever.

The Sword, Not The Gun!

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:17 KJV).

I created a hashtag from the aforementioned scripture, #theswordnotthegun, which to this day I post on Facebook every month. I also wrote a piece for the New York Theological Seminary's newsletter in September 2020 with the same title, in which I incorporated my growing up in Harlem with the importance of the church and the Bible

in my survival. My purpose in advertising such a slogan was and is to bring awareness to the violence that affects us daily, but also to offer the better choice in the Word of God.

In addition to promoting the hashtag on social media, I also created a t-shirt and mask with the slogan “The Sword, Not The Gun,” Ephesians 6:1, and my site team did a photo shoot at the church wearing both (See Appendix D: Pictures). On Thanksgiving, November 25, 2021, I displayed pictures on Facebook and Instagram requesting that people remember and pray for families who lost loved ones to gun violence before eating the “traditional meal.”

Taking the hashtag/slogan as far as it could go and even my writing about it, I desired another reflection from one of my peers, so I called Rev. Dr. Gloria Bradshaw, the Pastor of the Mt. Bethel Baptist Church in the Bronx, NY. I explained to her what I was trying to put together and how I, along with my site-team, thought she would be a great candidate to write a piece on “The Sword Not the Gun.” In her writing, Dr. Bradshaw explained why the Sword or the Word of God is the best choice and why clergy needs to put action behind their words. I agree totally with Dr. Bradshaw when she refers to the need to offer our youth, young adults, and communities another alternative or option besides a gun and life over death:

The weapon of choice should be the sword of God. The word of God speaks a new agenda to a common enemy out of the mouths of a faithful people. This weapon of choice will take us out of a violent situation, and yet it can still defend and protect us and our family. This is helping the community to know that there are other choices to solve a potential violent episode in one’s life. The church has a responsibility as we look at the growing numbers of violence in our society and communities there is an alarming increasing number of shootings that have brought us all to fear. The criminal mind seems to have possessed the youth as well as the adults to commit robberies and gang related violence. Is this because of the current circumstances we are now living in with Corvid- 19? Many of us are now faced with choices of how to handle our anxiety, stress, hardships,

and grief. The daily normal choices we must make for our families are becoming increasingly impossible for people to separate themselves from their emotions and reach out for spiritual guidance in their lives. This is where the church takes its leading role and brings a calm and peace to their communities. There is hope when we redirect the purpose of living in fear and strengthen it with faith to survive.⁴²

Not everyone agreed with me in reference to the hashtag/slogan. I had one young lady challenge me on Facebook by stating the Sword of the Spirit and the gun both killed. I agreed with her, but noted that the Sword of the Spirit when used correctly kills what needs to be killed in reference to both internal and external demons. The Sword of the Spirit kills what would prevent humankind from living a life that is pleasing to God. The Sword of the Spirit kills the flesh and sin that would separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It is my weapon of choice, has been, and will be; I choose The Sword, Not the Gun!!!

Gun Buyback Program

Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your father's served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 24:14, 15 ESV).

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in waters below (Exodus 20:4 NIV).

There is such an obsession with owning or purchasing guns in America that I believe they have become idols which have been magnified, protected, and, yes, even worshipped. The United States gun manufacturers produce so many guns that every

⁴² Gloria Bradshaw, "For Such A Time as This: A Clarion Call To Clergy," Appendix F.

individual could arm himself/herself and still have guns left over. Guns are associated with power and the need to demonstrate it, as opposed to defensive measures that most proclaim. How do we get some of these illegal guns off the streets? One of the ways is through a buyback program.

Pastor Jay A. Gooding, the Pastor of Miracle Temple COGIC and the Director of a gun violence prevention program at Jacobi Hospital called “Stand Up To Violence,” places emphasis on the importance of clergy being active in the community, on their local Community Boards, at clergy meetings, and collaborating with their local politicians and law enforcement. Pastor Gooding shares not only what it will take to be effective before involvement in combating gun violence, but also what it takes if clergy wants to join law enforcement in assisting in the gun buyback procedure to help get guns off the street:

In the case of a shooting in the community, I’m able to gather the clergy, elected officials, community leaders and residents to make a presence together. Prior to the pandemic our Jacobi SUV program had seen a reduction in gun violence by 57% in our target areas. I have had the opportunity to host two (2) “Gun buybacks events” at both of our houses of worship, by building a partnership with the district attorney of Bronx County. We hosted the initial Bronx “gun buyback” in 2009 under the auspices of then Bronx DA Robert Johnson, at our church located in the Highbridge section of the Bronx. In 2016 at our Williamsbridge location we hosted the event by newly elected Bronx DA Darcel Clark. Gun buybacks are sponsored in conjunction with NYPD and the District Attorney office. Depending upon the area of the Borough which they’re looking to host the event, houses of worship are chosen. When houses of worship are chosen, there are certain qualifications they must have, and approved by NYPD and their security check in advance. First, they need to have at least two (2) egresses. One door for the person to come in with the gun, and another to exit. Second the house of worship needs to have a separate and secure spot where NYPD receives and does a safety check on the firearm to dislodge any bullets that may be in the chamber. The person who brings in the firearm wait for the gun to be processed. There are no questions asked as to where or how they possessed the firearm, and the person is anonymous. That person waits while a \$200 debit card is

distributed to them. This money is usually sponsored by the District Attorney office. If a BB gun is processed, there is a \$25 donation.⁴³

I realize that this will not happen for every pastor due to the dynamics of the physical church buildings, the concern for safety in bringing guns to the House of the Lord, or not wanting to bring that type of attention to the church, to name a few; but there are churches that can host such an event and pastors that are willing to do so in order to help get guns off the street.

Life is about choices and we make them every day, some great, some not so great, but all important in their own right. Joshua told Israel to put away the idols that their fathers worshipped and the idols that were even in Canaan; he encouraged them to fear and serve the Lord in faithfulness. Joshua explained to Israel that they have a choice to make, choose Yahweh or choose the idols created by man, both past and present. He then boldly declares, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!” (Joshua 24:15).

America has a choice to make: Put away the guns, and serve the Lord!!!

Gun Violence In New York City

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly (John 10:10 KJV).

Reverend Loren Russell not only knows the statistics of homicides that have occurred over the year 2021, he also understands the effects gun violence has on the community and families who live in the urban areas. Reverend Russell is absolutely right when he indicates that there are no winners whereas gun violence is concerned, for whether victims or perpetrators, families continue to suffer. Reverend Russell works with

⁴³ Jay Gooding Jr., “For Such A Time as This: A Clarion Call To Clergy,” Appendix F.

a nationwide operation to curb gun violence known as Ceasefire. This operation is a collaboration of both Federal, State, and local organizations along with nonprofits and clergy that work toward curbing violence in the community. Representatives of the organization meet with the family, and particularly the one who is subject to the violence, and a discussion takes place as to the consequences of gun violence, in the forms of death, imprisonment, and serious injury, to the victim, their family, or innocent bystanders; and then they are offered services to keep them from engaging in such violence through employment, training, counseling, and mentoring programs, to name a few. According to Reverend Russel:

There have been trust issues getting the recipients to take advantage of the services, but the effort and the intent is genuine with no strings attached. The process of communication is clear; tell them what the consequences of continued gun violence will be, the resources that have been made available, and they will, hopefully, choose the resources that will help them to stay alive, safe and out of prison.⁴⁴

Choosing life over death sounds so familiar, sounds like the Gospel.

Jesus said that the thief comes to kill, steal, and destroy. The thief chooses the gun to commit murder; the thief is the one who commits mass homicides by shooting up schools, places of employment, and in the communities in which we live, shop, attend church, and call home. But Jesus' actions involve living life to the fullest not just in the by and by, but in the here and now. I repeat, life is about choices and we must help people and teach people to choose life! Put away the guns; choose life. Teach our children how to live peaceably, choose life! Choose life, choose life, **CHOOSE LIFE!**

⁴⁴ Loren Russell, "For Such A Time As This: A Clarion Call To Clergy," Appendix F.

Survey Results

A survey was sent out to 87 men and women in the clergy via SurveyMonkey.

The following table shows the results of that survey (See Appendix H: Clergy Assessment Survey).

<i>1. Does the church where you Pastor or worship have anything in place to address Gun Violence?</i>			
Choices	Responses	Percentage	
Youth Workshops	3	7.5	
Counseling for families	5	12.5	
Collaborations	15	37.5	
Sermons/Teaching Series that address the topic	9	22.5	
Gun Buyback Day	7	17.5	
None of the above	18	45	
<i>2. What are you willing to do or implement in your church to address the Gun Violence in the community?</i>			
Take a free Gun Violence Awareness Course	22	55	
Sermons/Teaching Series	27	67.5	
Counseling	22	55	
Youth Workshops	23	57.5	
Gun Buyback Day	12	30	
Collaborations	32	80	
None of the above	0	0	

Table 1: Clergy Survey

The first question: Does the church where you pastor or worship have anything in place to address gun violence? Of those that responded, out of 87 participants, 7.5% have Youth Workshops, 12.5% have any type of counseling, 37.5% have collaborations within the community with nonprofits, and other churches, 22.5% conduct sermon/teaching series around the topic, 17.5% have been involved in a gun buyback day, and the most important statistic states that 45%, almost half those taking the survey, have nothing in place to address gun violence that occurs right outside the church doors. The statistics speak for themselves and let one know that the need for ministries and response by the

churches is necessary! The poor response in reference to the survey reflects the feelings of almost 5,000 friends on social media, half are clergy, who speak to the lack of concern and leadership of the churches in regards to gun violence.

The second question: What are you willing to do or implement in your church to address the Gun Violence in the community? Of the 87 participants, 55% were willing to take a free online Gun Violence Awareness Course with Johns Hopkins, 67.5% are willing to conduct a teaching/preaching series to address the issue, 55% are willing to conduct or put some type of counseling in place, 57.5% are willing to offer Youth workshops to educate youth, 80% are willing to collaborate with other nonprofits, churches, and government, but the most important statistic in the second question is that not one person was willing to do nothing. The high percentage by clergy who do something offers hope in what appears to be a hopeless situation. Each and every one that completed the survey and left an email address was sent a thank you note along with attachment of the document: “For Such a Time as This: A Clarion Call to Clergy,” to help get them started. The next steps in acting will be left up to those who stated an interest in putting ministries or things in place to combat gun violence.

Sermon Series

“Do your best to win God’s approval as a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed and who teaches only the true message (2 Timothy 2:15 CEV).

During the month of June 2021, commonly known as Gun Violence Awareness month, I conducted a sermon series once a week with the church to address the critical issue that our communities are faced with. I taught and preached from different excerpts of the Bible to enlighten the congregation to as to certain statistics and to address topics, such as self-defense, the 2nd Amendment, and violence from both a spiritual and physical

perspective. I shared with the congregation that violence is nothing new and referenced Cain and the killing of his brother Abel, the second sin after the first sin of disobedience to God by Adam and Eve. The killing or murder of Abel would set in place the rest of the violence throughout the Bible. I also reference Samson's killing of 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass, equivalent to the use of an assault rifle that has been used in mass shootings and weapons that should have been banned down through the years but are still accessible.

Peter is the disciple I used who pulled the sword and cut off Malchus' ear as one who reflects the false sense of boldness that comes with carrying a weapon, oftentimes while looking for trouble or initiating rather than diffusing it. I referenced the Apostle Paul as one who lets the church know the only weapons that matter are spiritual and not carnal with the Sword of the Spirit or the Word of God the most important offensive and defensive weapon a disciple of Christ can arm himself/herself with. The following is the list of sermons that I gave on gun violence.

Title	Scriptures	Point #1	Point #2	Point #3
The Mark Of Cain	Genesis 4:8-15	I am my brother's keeper	My actions have consequences	God is merciful even to the merciless
Samson's AR-15	Judges 15:14-20	Assault weapons must be banned by every State across America	There are times in the Bible where violence, even murder was sanctioned by God	God used Samson to avenge their Philistine enemies and as an example of how Yahweh can work through one man
Armed and Dangerous	Matthew 26:51-53	Peter's false sense of boldness. The boldness that comes through carrying a concealed weapon	Every blood bought believer ought to be spiritually armed and dangerous	Jesus's rebuke of Peter and the acknowledgment that He has a greater spiritual army of defence readily accessible
The Only Weapons that Matter	2 Corinthians 10:1-11	Spiritual v. Carnal Weapons	Flesh v. Spirit	Spiritual Weapons will keep your mind in check and stayed on Jesus
The Sword Not the Gun	Ephesians 6:17	The Sword of the Spirit is the Word of God	Know Your Weapon	Only effective if used in context with the Whole Armour of God

On June 5, 2021, I engaged in a peace march that was called by Evangelist Robert Rice who had reached out to me on Facebook. We marched from 144th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd to the State Building on 125th Street. It was there that clergy and politicians spoke and clergy prayed for the community. I was honored to lead one of the prayers.

Aside from Peace Marches and rallies, I have had the opportunity to moderate three workshops/summits between clergy and those that are involved with the work of combating gun violence. The first one I was able to moderate and organize was with Kingdom Destiny Fellowship International, on April 3, 2021, as a part of their Social Justice Ministry under their International Presiding Prelate Bishop E. Derrick E. Robinson. I invited three guest speakers in that of Pastor Gilford Monroe (the GodSquad, 67th Clergy Council), Pastor Jay A. Gooding Sr. (Stand Up To Violence/Jacobi Hospital), and Dr. Loren Russell (Matters of Faith telecast). This Gun Violence Seminar was conducted over Zoom and had close to fifty clergy from all over the United States that gleaned from the aforementioned three as to what clergy needs to do in combating gun violence (see Appendix E: Flyers and Announcements).

I collaborated with Pastor Gilford Monroe of the GodSquad out in Brooklyn, NY who I met over ten years back. Pastor Monroe is one who has organized clergy to work alongside of the 103rd Precinct and is the organizer of the 67th Clergy Council out of that Precinct. Pastor Monroe not only has a presence within the community as an organizer and first responder to shootings, he also works alongside state and local politicians including law enforcement. Pastor Monroe also asked me to come on board as an Advisor to the Clergy Council in 2021. I reached out to Pastor Monroe in June 2020 to

inquire as to whether or not he would be organizing any workshops for June and as a result he put something together on July 1, in which I collaborated with him (see Appendix E: Flyers and Announcements).

I am the Second Vice President of the Baptist Evening Conference of Greater NY and Vicinity where the Rev. Dr. Helen Wingate is the President. During the month of July 2021 as the numbers of homicides and shootings were going up, I asked to organize and moderate another gun violence summit before the conference break for the summer. I invited as our guests: Pastor Gilford Monroe, Pastor Jay Gooding Sr., and Dr. Alfonso Wyatt (former graduate of NYTS). There were approximately forty members of our conference that were a part of this Zoom summit, and clergy was enlightened as to what they can do within their churches to help combat gun violence that plagues our communities.

One of the highlights of this journey I have mentioned in a previous chapter was to be able to return to Harlem, NY and preach/teach where I was born and raised. I stated that I had the opportunity to do this at Reverend Al Sharpton's House of Justice in which I was able to touch on the issue of gun violence during the short time I was given to speak (see Appendix D: Pictures).

CHAPTER 8 MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES

The Process

The members of the site team dedicated substantial time and energy in joining me in the process of competency assessment. A summary of the Site Team's and my assessment of ministerial competencies is as follows:

Theologian

Reverend Ratliff, as a result of his Baptist foundation, has grown and developed nicely to the doctrines of the faith. Reverend Ratliff has crossed cultural boundaries by creating an annual outreach day which blesses the community which is predominantly of Hispanic origins. Reverend Hiram Ratliff gets as many people as possible involved in this outreach effort which is a blessing to the community.

Preacher

One of the most effective gifts Reverend Ratliff possesses is his preaching ability. Reverend Ratliff's preaching is spirit centered, and he preaches sermons that people can relate to and are relevant to what takes place today. Reverend Ratliff's preaching is indoctrinated within Baptist roots and oftentimes ends with a charismatic retelling of the story with a fiery delivery.

Worship

Reverend Ratliff is able to make worship come alive though not only in his preaching ability but also as a gifted singer who began his journey singing in the choir. Every Sunday Reverend Ratliff engages the congregation in a traditional, contemporary, hymn, or praise and worship song that invokes the presence of God. Reverend Ratliff should continue this type of worship as it is effective.

Reverend Ratliff also works along with the Minister of Music to play a song that parallels the sermon that he has just preached, as this is communicated to the Minister of Music the week before.

Ecumenist

Reverend Ratliff has shared the pulpit and invited preachers of different denominations to preach the Word. Reverend Ratliff has worked with Rabbis, Buddhists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventist to name a few in effecting change within the City of New York. Changes, such as, Pre-K for all, identification cards for undocumented, and rallies for fair wages concerning fast food workers. Reverend Ratliff understands the importance of working not only with government but also with different faiths in an effort to effect positive change within our City.

Religious Educator

Reverend Ratliff has an extensive library of books which he uses for sermon preparation and Bible study. Reverend Ratliff's Bible study is known as the Bible Academy in which he not only uses the Bible but has assigned book readings at times in order to teach and keep things interesting. Reverend Ratliff has used and encourages the reading of different translations of the Bible during study and his preaching.

Counselor

Reverend Ratliff encourages his parishioners during services to set up appointments with him through his secretary, that he is approachable, and his door is always open. Oftentimes, parishioners are seen on Sunday morning without appointment and family crises are dealt with before or after service. Reverend Ratliff is flexible with his counseling hours during the week and should continue to encourage such in order to cut down on some of the traffic and demands of Sunday morning worship.

Pastor/Shepherd

Another strength of Reverend Ratliff is getting new members involved which he encourages from the very beginning. New members after they join are given a Meet and Greet which is an introduction to all the ministries, their leadership, and what they do. This is hosted quarterly by the Deaconess ministry and it is during this time that new members can reflect on what ministry he/she would like to be a part of. Reverend Ratliff also acknowledges when new members join a ministry during his pastoral remarks which helps build their self-esteem and makes them feel connected to the church

Competencies Chosen for Development

1. **Leader:** Candidate motivates others, respects talent and delegates responsibilities, appreciative of jobs well done.

Strategies:

- Complete an online training course on Gun Violence Awareness. (June 2020, Ratliff)

Evaluation: Conduct a workshop with 5 to 10 parishioners for feedback through written evaluation. (Pre/Post-tests, July 2020, Ratliff)

2. **Change Agent:** Candidate involves others in the process of change, and builds coalitions for participation.

Strategies:

- Complete a PowerPoint training. (August 2020, Ratliff)
- Develop a PowerPoint presentation on Gun Violence. (August 2020, Ratliff)
- Link PowerPoint presentation through social media outlets. (August 2020, Ratliff)

Evaluation: Create survey to determine the awareness, application, and action of at least 25 parishioners that preview PowerPoint. (August 2020, Ratliff)

3. **Administrator:** Candidate is able to identify resources and involve others in the decision-making process. Candidate feels the need to develop administrative skills in a more intentional manner.

Strategies:

- Create a bibliography of resources to develop my program management skills. (September 2020, Ratliff)
- Select one to utilize. (September 2020, Ratliff)

Evaluation:

- Request a written evaluation from site-team on the one skill. (September 2020, Grimes, Gaston/Gaston, Thomas)

CONCLUSION FINISHING THE RACE!

“Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11 ESV)

Nazareth! Can anything good come from there? Nathaniel asked, “Come and see,” said Phillip. (John 1:46 NIV)

As I sit here and type the final chapter of this action dissertation, I can’t help but reflect on a four-year journey. I liken it to an ongoing marathon with peaks and valleys from my own personal struggles, trials and tribulations, celebrations and triumphs, victories and defeats, spiritual burnout and rejuvenation. Oftentimes I have had to pace myself: from having to find a place to live to Covid-19 hitting the church membership (even my spouse) to pastoring through a pandemic to learning how to be in an online Zoom classroom environment to completing an action dissertation project! Here I sit, faced with a similar question that Nathaniel asked concerning the hood, the ghetto, the gun violence that stares us in the face day after day: Can any good thing come out of this dissertation on gun violence? I’m proud to say, as Phillip did concerning the Messiah, Come and see!

I took my free online course with Johns Hopkins back in May and June 2020. Through the online course, I was able to gather statistics on gun fatalities, safety measures, federal, state and local laws, underground sales, who can and cannot purchase, background checks and criteria, to name just a few. It is with this wisdom that I was able to organize and moderate a couple of online summits with clergy. I was also able to

preach/teach a series to bring awareness to this prevalent and pressing issue. The site-team and I were able to seek out fellow clergy and parishioners to assign the task of developing a piece to distribute to peers who are interested in designing ministries in their churches. These individuals were awarded a stipend of \$50.00 for their time and efforts.

All of this helped strengthen my skills as a leader, for which I am grateful. Time management was essential in this process, eliminating some of the things that I would have liked to have done for more face to face activities that did not happen. Although I would need an additional year to complete what I set out to do, what it taught me about myself is priceless. I found myself being awarded with what Solomon calls, “time and chance.” The time and the chance to complete a small part of this race. Everyone was not able to take advantage of this “time and chance”; there were those who started the race with me who dropped out for whatever reason or took a detour and decided to do something else, but I thank God for “time and chance” which awarded me this opportunity to complete something I have never done before, an action dissertation project.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Proposal

GUNS AND ROSES

By

HIRAM RATLIFF

A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT PROPOSAL

New York Theological Seminary

June 22, 2020

Challenge Statement

As a Youth Anti-Violence Advocate for over 20 years, Probation Officer, Community Youth Advocate, Senior Pastor of the New Tabernacle Baptist Church in the Bronx, NY for nine years, and member of United Missionary Baptist Association I have concluded that enough is not being done concerning the gun violence that has and is occurring in our communities. “A total of 35,141 people die from gun violence in the United States each year...” according to the Brady Campaign to prevent Gun Violence. This demonstration project will develop a curriculum that will be used to address the trauma of the effects of gun violence on the Church and communities.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE SETTING

I began my journey in April 1996 as a probation officer with the New York City Department of Probation. It was during this time that I realized the importance of working with juveniles that were troubled. Without services and role models which offer positive direction they were at-risk of becoming delinquent. After my career with Probation, other nonprofits, such as, NYTS Uth-Turn, Adolescent and Family Comprehensive Services, and Pius XII-Youth and Family Services would groom me to work with troubled youth in various capacities. I presently work with JCCA/Mt. Pleasant Cottage School as a teacher's aide to some of the youth I would have placed for violating their probation.

It just so happened that my call to the ministry would also parallel my professional career as a Youth Advocate, as the first ministry in which I was placed was Youth Ministry at the Antioch Baptist Church, Harlem, NY in October 1998. I served as the Youth Minister from 1998-2008, during which time I taught Youth and Young Adult Bible study, organized and planned youth revivals/recreational trips, and counseled youth on an ongoing basis.

My work with youth would at Antioch and various nonprofits would carry me into my pastoral position at the New Tabernacle Baptist Church, Bronx (NTBC), located at 990 East 181 Street (recently renamed Reverend James B. Staggers Place). The mother church of New Tabernacle Baptist Church is Tabernacle Baptist Church in Charleston,

SC. The late Reverend Grover Cleveland Williams, labored in the Tabernacle Baptist Church, before migrating to New York City about 1950. In March 1952, the late Reverend G. C. Williams, organizer and pastor, organized the New Tabernacle Baptist Church. The church was in a small area located on 16th Street. Although the church was formed in 1952, the Certificate of Incorporation pursuant to Article 7 of the NY Religious Corporation Law was not accomplished until 25th day of June 1954.

The church continued to grow and needed more space. From 1957-1959, the church moved to a larger edifice located at 1094 Washington Avenue, Bronx, New York. After the Lord called Reverend G.C. Williams home, Reverend Hayes became the pastor for a short duration. At the conclusion of the first major turmoil for this young church, Reverend Henry Bolden became the Pastor. On/or about 1968/1969, the church experienced another major turmoil in the form of a major fire, which caused extensive damage to the edifice. The Lord blessed us to be able to conduct service in another building located on Washington Avenue near 167th Street.

A few years after recovering from the fire, and at the height of another major turmoil, Reverend Henry Bolden moved on to become the pastor of another church. For several months, the New Tabernacle Baptist Church was without a pastor. Attendance and membership dwindled during this time frame. In July 1970, Reverend James B. Staggers became the fourth Pastor of NTBC. The church began to grow again. In October 1980, the church relocated to its current location which was at 181 Street. In honor of Pastor Staggers' legacy, the street has been renamed "Reverend James B. Staggers Place."

The church is now certified under 501(c) (3), which benefits the church membership and local community in many ways. Some of the community outreach programs initiated since relocation to the current address are an ongoing clothing program for the community and a weekly food pantry program.

Most, if not all, of those who started out on this journey have been called home by the Lord. In God's wise providence, the late pastor, Reverend James B. Staggers, was called from labor to reward in September 2008. The church glorifies God for the successful leadership that Reverend Staggers provided us during his tenure as pastor for 38 years, and his wife, Leading Lady Emeritus, Mother Daisy Staggers. The church is thankful to God for the contributions of Reverend Staggers, and those before and after him, to the stability of NTBC for 68 years.

A major highlight of Reverend Staggers' leadership was for New Tabernacle to always pray together, stay together, and wait on the Lord. After his death, the congregation adhered his wise council, and waited two-and-a-half years before declaring me the new the Pastor of the New Tabernacle Baptist, a pastorate that includes my wife, Leading Lady, Mrs. Maria-Antoinette Ratliff, and the gifts talents she brings to the ministry.

Although I became the pastor-elect on March 20, 2011, it was not until Sunday, October 13, 2011 that I was installed as the fifth pastor of New Tabernacle. God is to be praised that I was allowed to make several upgrades and historical accomplishments during my first year as pastor.

Through my leadership and motivational skills, I have planted and nurtured the seeds of recognition, acknowledgement, reward and encouragement among kindergarten, elementary, junior high, high school, college and post-graduate students.

Since becoming pastor, I have worked along with the congregants to build a bridge between church and community to complete the following:

- Annual Community Outreach Day in August that services more than 1,500 people annually with distribution of free food, Bibles and clothing for the entire family; health screenings; voter registration; arts and crafts and outdoor fun, hosted for children of all ages.
- Annual Community Safety Meetings where free smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are distributed; people registered to work the polls for upcoming elections; and safety issues regarding the seniors and the West Farms community were discussed.
- Free hot and cold breakfasts are served every Sunday morning for the Youth Sunday School.
- Established new ministries inclusive of the Social Services Ministry; Health Care Ministry; Chaplaincy Ministry (which added nine New York State certified chaplains to this ministry); Media Ministry; and the Glorious 4 Quartet Group.
- Created church logo and theme, *“Where God’s Light Shines All the Time”*
- Worked closely with community political leaders—Councilman Ruben Diaz, Sr.; Bronx President Ruben Diaz, Jr.; Senator Luis Sepulveda; Councilwoman Karines Reyes; and Councilman Ritchie Torres—to get grants and necessary information to help with community and church programs.

- Hosted annual recognition of academic achievement of students of all ages who have been promoted to a new level in school
- Revamped the weekly Bible Study to encourage people to study the Word of God
- Established “Friday Night Flavor” services to keep the saints of NTBC spiritually encouraged during the year
- Established a Leadership Conference that will teach members of NTBC to become effective and viable leaders for the 21st century church

The New Tabernacle Church family has worked feverishly to do Christian ministry during a declining fiscal economy. Through various successful fundraisers and faithful giving by the loyal and dedicated members of this ministry, New Tabernacle was able to re-carpet the entire sanctuary with brand-new and top-of-the-line commercial carpeting, reupholster the pews and the pulpit furniture, and purchase new TV screens thus creating the Media Ministry. “With God, all things are possible.”

The New Tabernacle Baptist Church is a Baptist church under the United Missionary Baptist Church, Inc. and the National Baptist Conventions. The church has approximately 150 to 200 hundred members on the roll and hosts about 125 members from Sunday to Sunday. Approximately 90 percent of the congregation is African-American with southern roots. The remaining 10 percent largely includes those of Hispanic and Caribbean descent. Approximately 90 percent of the members are not from the immediate vicinity, and travel across the Bronx and Manhattan to get to the church. Approximately 60-70% of the congregants are over fifty years of age, while only 5-10% are under twenty.

The community is plagued with a high poverty rate, but, as a result of gentrification, new housing and businesses are being planted. Despite the positive changes in the community, gang violence, shootings, and drug dealing are still prevalent.

The leadership/ministries consist of the Pastor, Associate Ministers, Deacons' Ministry, Deaconesses' Ministry, Trustees' Ministry, Missionaries' Ministry, Ushers' Ministry, Nurses' Ministry, Men's/Women's Ministries, Chaplains' Ministry, Clerical staff, Culinary staff, Pastor's Aide Ministry, Youth Ministry, and four choirs (Male Chorus, Youth choir, Voices of New Tabernacle, and Praise Team). Worship service are divided according to the person in charge: on 1st Sunday, the Associate Ministers lead and carry out worship with the Voices of New Tab rendering music; on 2nd Sunday, the Chaplains are in charge of worship and the Praise Team ministers are in charge of song; on 3rd Sunday, the Deacons and Deaconesses are in charge of carrying out worship with the Voices of New Tab rendering music; 4th Sunday is Youth/Young Adult Sunday and the children are in charge of the worship, singing, scripture, prayers, etc. etc.; and every fifth Sunday, the men lead worship and the Male Chorus is in charge of the singing. It is through this diversity that people become more involved in worship as participators and not spectators.

The associate ministers assist me in carrying out the worship service through prayer and reading of scriptures. Each associate operates in their own gifts; for example, one associate is also choir director, and another associate runs and operates the youth ministry.

The deacons and deaconesses assist me in carrying out the worship during a devotional period prior to the beginning of service. deacons and deaconesses also assist in

visitation of the sick and in serving communion. The deacons are a part of the official board of the church.

The trustees oversee the collection of offerings, deposits in accounts, writing of church checks including salaries and checks based on the needs of the ministry. The trustees are a part of the official board, but answer to the requests of the pastor and the deacons when acting in the best interest of the church.

The clerical ministry is responsible for the printing and reading of the bulletins on Sunday morning. The clerical ministry is also responsible for communication during the week concerning special services, members that take ill, and other important notices.

The culinary ministry is in charge of the purchasing and cooking of events between church services that include anniversaries and repasses.

The missionaries' ministry assists with the preparation of the new members when they join as candidates for baptism. They prepare them physically for baptism and the missionaries also aide the ministry in visitation of the sick.

The nurses' ministry is trained in CPR and serve the pulpit with water, juice, and towels as needed. The nurses' ministry also assists anyone who may become physically ill within the service.

The usher's ministry distributes programs, escorts people to seats, and assists in taking up the missions offering. The ushers are the watchmen and watchwomen on the walls in helping to keep order within the services.

The pastor's aide ministry helps raise money for the pastor during the year to assist and defray the costs of the use of vehicle in visitation of the sick, cleaning of robes, vacation leave, sabbaticals, educational/academic materials to name a few.

The Men's/Women's ministries host different services and outings during the year to raise money for specific church projects. They host services such as prayer breakfast (Men's) and retreats (Women's) in which proceeds go towards church renovations.

The Youth Ministry raises money during the year to provide for both recreational and spiritual activities. The money raised goes towards trips in the summer, educational scholarships, and spiritual retreats provided through UMBA.

All ministries have their own annual day during the year in which services are celebrated in the afternoon. This creates fellowships with other Baptist churches. The church also fellowships with other Baptist churches for their annual celebrations within various ministries, and for the most part these are standard engagements.

Presidents are voted into office every two years, and the church has a strong tradition of members voting and deciding what they want as opposed to allowing the pastor to lead and make decisions. The board consists of the pastor, deacons, and trustees.

I meet monthly with the Board and host an annual Vision Meeting in which church business is discussed i.e. finance, the navigation of the ministry, sharing of vision between Pastor and people, and people and Pastor.

The New Tabernacle Baptist Church is one of over 100 churches that make up the United Missionary Baptist Association which includes Harlem, the Bronx, and part of Westchester County. The United Missionary Baptist Association began on October 25, 1955 as a merger of the General Baptist Association, the Progressive Baptist Association, and the Manhattan, Bronx, Westchester, and Staten Island Associations (MBWSIA). These three organizations merged in an effort to become a formal member of the State Baptist commonly known as the Empire Baptist Convention of New York, Inc. These

three local Baptist organizations whose objectives were similar in missions and education felt that they would be stronger together and an alliance was necessary to carry out their goals.

The initial called meeting for their amalgamation was held at Southern Baptist Church, 12-16 West 108th Street, Manhattan, Dr. C. B. Wilson, Pastor. This was the first meeting of any Baptist organization at the church. Representing the three associations were the Rev. J.A. Polite, President of the General Baptist Association and Ms. Eva S. Bonaparte, President of the Women's Auxiliary, the Rev. E. M. Moore, President of the Progressive Baptist Association and Ms. Lillie M. Gibson, President of the Women's Auxiliary, and the Rev. Dr. O. Clay Maxwell Jr., Moderator of the Manhattan, Bronx, Westchester, and Staten Island Association and Ida M. Townes, President of its Women's Auxiliary.

After a period of devotion, Dr. A. L. Hughes was voted as the presider over the session and Rev. Walter Harding was voted as the Recording Secretary. Dr. Hughes spoke concerning the importance of the merger in doing the Lord's work along with a brief account of the status of Baptists in New York. Suggestions were then taken for a name of the organization and it was unanimously agreed that the organization would call itself United Baptist Missionary Association (UMA). The session concluded with the Rev. Dr. O. Clay Maxwell Jr., Pastor of the Baptist Temple, Manhattan as its first Moderator.

On April 11, 1957, the Association became legally incorporated as the United Missionary Baptist Association, Inc. (UMBA). It is known as the United Missionary Baptist Association of New York and Vicinity and its Auxiliaries, Inc. Presently, UMBA

has approximately 114 out of 161 active churches. Its sessions are held quarterly, and are hosted in turn by participating churches with the annual session being held in October. Officers are elected every year at the Annual Session and can serve four years consecutively and commence their term of office the following January to coincide with the fiscal year of the Association. The current Moderator is the Rev. Dr. Anthony Lowe, Senior Pastor of the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, Bronx NY.

Given the histories of New Tabernacle Baptist Church and United Missionary Baptist Church, along with the ministries that they offer, it is my conclusion that enough has not and is not being done about gun violence and murder, particularly of the youth, that occurs outside of the four walls of each and every church.

In 2018 I had to eulogize two young people whose families were a part of my congregation. Less than six months apart, they were both victims of gun violence and died at the hands of two other young people. One of them, Vahlana Roberts, was a seventeen year old African-American female who had dreams of being a ballplayer. The other, Ja'Quan Smith, was a twenty-one year old African-American male who also loved basketball. He had graduated only two years prior from St. Raymond's High School, and dreamed of becoming a successful businessman. As a result of the death of these two young people, I decided that I had to try and do something, not only to keep their memories alive, but, hopefully, to prevent the type of pain and suffering I witnessed from happening to other families in the future.

I began my work with the Roberts family, first fighting for justice by trying to locate their daughter's killer and then attempting to set up a scholarship fund in memory of her name. I met with the family, politicians and local officials until the perpetrator was

caught and is currently on trial. I also met with the N.Y. Yankees establishment to try to set up scholarships in their memories, but to no avail. Thus, I have been led by the Spirit of God to work with preachers and pastors to develop a curriculum of ministries that will deal with the gun violence that occurs outside their doors daily, in the communities that are affected by them.

My mission is an effort to make the communities safer and give our youth a fighting chance to fulfill their dreams. I have already spoken with pastors both young and old from UMBA, as well as the Moderator of the UMBA, Dr. Lowe, all of whom are excited and on board concerning the project.

CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGE

As a Youth Anti-Violence Advocate for over 20 years, Probation Officer, Community Youth Advocate, Senior Pastor of the New Tabernacle Baptist Church in the Bronx, NY for nine years, and member of United Missionary Baptist Association I have concluded that enough is not being done concerning the gun violence that has and is occurring in our communities. “A total of 35,141 people die from gun violence in the United States each year...”, according to the Brady Campaign to prevent Gun Violence. This demonstration project will develop a curriculum that will be used to address the trauma of the effects of gun violence on the Church and communities.

There are more guns in the United States than there are people, which means that we have enough to arm every citizen and stranger with a gun and still have weapons left over. Guns, due to their availability or easy access can, have and will end up in the wrong hands. Pastors, sooner or later, will have to bury a child, a teen, a young, middle-aged, or elder adult due to gun violence which plagues our communities from the urban setting to the suburbs. As I have indicated, I have had to bury two teens out of New Tabernacle Baptist Church due to gun violence; but, I have also witnessed one of my parishioners who took it upon himself to purchase an illegal handgun and slay another young black male, as a result of an unpaid drug debt. The family are still prominent members of our church as their son and brother serves a sentence of forty years to life. This systemic evil is one that will not go away anytime soon and one in which pastors must confront sooner rather than later. There has to be an awakening of the church, particularly the Baptist churches to face the issue, address the issue, and move towards solutions in ministries that will abate the problem commonly known as gun violence.

I believe that gun violence is a systemic evil that needs systemic changes concerning laws that allow easy access to guns, programs that will keep our youth from getting involved with gangs, and economic opportunities that will open doors for those in need of decent wages to provide for their families. If change is going to occur, there has to be collaborative efforts made between Church, government, law enforcement, and community; but it begins with the Church. Gun violence has plagued out communities to the point that nowhere is safe, as mass shootings have played out in schools, churches, concerts, dance clubs, places of employments, baseball fields, playgrounds, movie theaters, shopping malls etc., and God only knows when and where the next one will occur.

Time and again, we are heartbroken by the news of another mass shooting. Part of our healing must be the conviction that we will do everything in our power to keep these tragedies from happening in a nation that continues to face a pandemic of gun violence. It's not only the high-profile mass shootings that we must work to prevent, but also the daily death-by-guns that claims more than 30,000 lives every year.¹

For the most part, Americans are more aware of the problem of gun violence than they have been in the past, although the awareness tends to be short term outrage that lasts until the next mass shooting.

The debate about gun violence in America has fallen into a depressingly familiar routine. After every horrendous mass shooting, like the recent one of the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, or weekend spree of violence in Chicago, the media commences a few days of wall-to-wall coverage. Large numbers of Americans demand changes in gun laws. Experts debate

¹ Prevention Institute, "Gun Violence Must Stop. Here's What We Can Do to Prevent More Deaths," <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/focus-areas/preventing-violence-and-reducing-injury/preventing-violence-advocacy> (accessed June 24, 2020).

various reforms on TV. When no changes are forthcoming, attention lags until the next mass shooting. Rinse and repeat.²

The question then becomes why is it that American's disgust and passion to reduce gun violence passes so quickly? According to William V. Glastis Jr., there are two significant reasons for what appears to be a never ending cycle in which mass shootings still occur and nothing is done legislatively.

The first is that the National Rifle Association, via its influence primarily within the Republican Party, has effective veto power over any gun legislation at the national level and in many states. The second is that the solutions that are typically discussed fail to match the scale of the problem. Banning military style semiautomatic weapons, regulating magazine clips, closing the gun show loophole, and preventing people with domestic violence restraining orders from acquiring weapons might well reduce levels of gun violence-to some extent. But it is hard to argue that these reforms, even if they all went into effect, would do much more than put a modest dent in the problem, and for a simple reason: there are just too many guns floating around.³

Mass shootings are defined as the murder of four or more people, although the majority of gun deaths in America are both homicides and suicides.

Suicides have historically made up most deaths by firearms in the United States, research shows. In 2017, about 60 percent of gun deaths were suicides, while about 37 percent were homicides, according to an analysis of the C.D.C. data by the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, a public health think tank. (The group is a sister organization of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, an advocacy group that works to oppose the N.R.A.).⁴

The easy access to guns has led to increases in homicides, suicides, and mass shootings, and according to Gastris, gun violence has spiked since 2014.

² William V Glastis, "A Real Long-Term Solution to Gun Violence," *Washington Monthly*, December, 2018, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/november-december-2018/a-real-longterm-solution-to-gun-violence/>(accessed June 24, 2020).

³ William V. Glastis.

⁴ Sara Mervosh, "Nearly 40,000 People Died From Guns in U.S. Last Year, Highest in 50 Years," *The New York Times*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/us/gun-deaths.html> (accessed June 24, 2020).

Those that would advocate for the right to bear arms hide behind laws, such as, the Second Amendment and state laws, such as “Stand Your Ground.” Although these laws were written in regard to self-defense of life and property, they have been cited to justify negligent and unjustifiable homicide, especially when it comes to people of color. “The Second Amendment wasn’t always as central to American politics as it is now. Vox breaks down how the NRA brought the Second Amendment to the forefront of the conversation in the nation, starting in the 1970s.”⁵

The case against “Stand Your Ground” gun laws is ever more compelling. Applied in one form or another in some three dozen states, these provisions allow ordinary citizens to use deadly force in self-defense even when violence could have been avoided simply by retreating. In effect, they extend the “castle doctrine,” which permits deadly force against home invaders, to public spaces. That’s a bad idea in principle, and a proven failure in practice.⁶

According to *USA Today*,

These laws provide either immunity from prosecution or a defense during trial in cases in which a person uses deadly force in public, even if he or she can safely retreat. The obvious consequence is that armed citizens are more emboldened to escalate public altercations, and that people of color are paying the price.⁷

According to Michael W. Austin in his book, *God And Guns In America*, the right to own a gun may be a legal right and a moral right, but however, it is also a conditional right when it comes down to the laws of the land. In other words, one cannot and should

⁵ Caroline Burke, “17 Articles about Gun Violence in America That Put the Epidemic into Perspective,” Bustle, December 13, 2018. <https://www.bustle.com/p/17-articles-about-gun-violence-in-america-that-put-the-epidemic-into-perspective-15519301> (accessed June 24, 2020).

⁶ Editorial Board, “The Travesty of ‘Stand Your Ground’,” <https://www.bloombergquint.com/gadfly/repeal-stand-your-ground-gun-laws> (accessed June 24, 2020).

⁷ Editorial Board, “People of color are paying the price for stand your ground laws: Today’s talker,” *USA Today*, July 7, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/policing/spotlight/2018/07/30/stand-your-ground-florida-markeis-mcglockton-shooting-policing-usa/866902002/> (accessed June 24, 2020).

not use the right to bear arms as a right to kill at will. He also states that laws, such as stand your ground have contributed to the slaughter of African Americans based on a perceived notion that the perpetrator's life was in imminent danger.

Whites who kill blacks are eleven times more likely to be found innocent of a crime in the states with stand-your-ground-laws than blacks who kill whites. The rationalization for the killings of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis- and we can add Philando Castro, Stephon Clark, and Walter Scott- reveal “a common thread: our legal structures and agents deemed it reasonable to perceive (unarmed) Black people as threatening.”⁸

There is no question that the effects of gun violence have devastating consequences on families, communities, youth, and people from all walks of life. The consequences are economic, psychological, and social to name a few.

Children are harmed in numerous ways abuse drugs and alcohol, suffer from depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder, resort to aggressive and violent behavior; and engage in criminal activity. Exposure to community violence, including witnessing shootings and hearing gunshots, makes it harder for children to succeed in school.⁹

Gun violence does not have just psychological effects on children but physical as well.

Exposure to gun violence can also erode physical health. When children live in neighborhoods where gun violence is common, they spend less time playing and being physically active, with one study finding that children said they would engage in an additional hour of physical activity every week if safety increased in their neighborhood.¹⁰

There are various things that the church and pastors can do to help curb gun violence in the communities from which they service, from using houses of worship in

⁸ Michael W. Austin, *God and Guns in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), 30.

⁹ Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “The Impact of Gun Violence on Children & Teens,” <https://everytownresearch.org/impact-gun-violence-american-children-teens/> (accessed June 24, 2020).

¹⁰ Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund.

buy back gun programs, lobbying local, state, and federal governments to implement laws for stricter mandatory background checks, collaborations with other organization or nonprofits that focus on social justice issues pertaining to gun violence, and creating ministries inside the church that will counsel families that fall prey to gun violence and workshops that will get young people talking about their fears, concerns, and attitudes towards gun violence.

Hopefully, this demonstration project will bring awareness to the seriousness of the crisis of gun violence, a motivation to do something about it amongst my clergy colleagues, and collaborations formed that will bring about changes in our churches and the communities to which we are called to serve. I humbly anticipate ministries will be developed within churches that will benefit youth and young adults, deal with trauma of gun violence, and advocacy for safer communities that will abate the violence caused by reckless shootings which lead to murder. It is up to the church, especially the Black church, to move with a sense of urgency, as it appears that no other community has been more affected by gun violence than the urban setting.

The more we can do to keep guns out of the hands of those who would kill, the better. Gun violence is a problem for those living in the areas where poverty is prevalent. In addition, African-Americans are sixteen times more likely to be homicide victims than non-Hispanic whites. Young men (ages fifteen to thirty-four) make up half of all murder victims. In this age group, homicide is the leading cause of death for African-Americans, and the second leading cause of death for Latinos. Of all murders in the age group, guns are used 84 percent of the time.¹¹

My site-team will assist in the organization of the events that will bring clergy together. It will include a breakfast as an introduction to how they can play a big part in

¹¹ Austin, *God And Guns In America*, 79.

the project, and a workshop that will be conducted by clergy in Brooklyn known as the God Squad about what they have done and are doing to help curb gun violence in their communities through collaboration with the local precincts. The site-team will also assist me in the collection of the writing pieces which will be done by some of the clergy and will involve deadlines. The site-team will help me critique the writings and will work with me and clergy to develop a clear and concise educational piece that can be replicated in local churches.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Biblical/Theological

What is God's take on violence, self-defense, and the use of weaponry as outlined by the Word?

Living in a world where violence is running rampant and murder appears to have become the norm, what does God say concerning violence, self-defense, and the use of weapons of warfare? The God that states, "thou shall not kill" appears to have justified violence in different texts within the Bible and this section will examine God's take on violence, self-defense, and the use of weaponry. Scriptures pertaining to violence, self-defense, and weaponry will be expounded on in relation to how the Christian stance and outlook might be shaped by the Word of God.

Political

How do laws, such as the Second Amendment and "Stand Your Ground" contribute to the gun violence that plague or communities?

Gun advocates hide behind their constitutional rights to bear arms within the frame of the 2nd Amendment without really defining the 2nd Amendment as it was written by the forefathers. This section will explore the 2nd Amendment along with "Stand Your Ground" laws and show how these laws have become grounds and justification for the murder of millions of innocent people across America year after year.

Sociological

What are the sociological effects that gun violence has played and continues to play within our communities, even within our church's daily operations?

There are more guns in the United States than there are people. There is a price that is being paid for the senseless shootings wrought by gun violence on our families, communities, and schools. This section will explore the ramifications and consequences brought about when innocent lives are lost. The psychological effects it has on the victims' families, the trauma that is experienced by the youth, and the social divide that it causes between urban and suburban communities. The false sense of security in those that conceal and carry a firearm will also be examined.

It will also explore the personal effects gun violence has on the families of the perpetrators of mass shootings and how they live their lives knowing their loved ones or relatives have caused such pain and anguish to other families.

CHAPTER 4 PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION

Goal #1- To raise the awareness of UMBA Pastors and New Tabernacle Baptist Church about gun violence.

- **Strategy 1:** Host a clergy breakfast (June 2020, Ratliff)
- **Strategy 2:** Workshop will be done to educate and build collaborations with organizations that are doing the work to help curb gun violence. (July 2020, GodSquad and/or N.Y. Against Gun Violence)
- **Strategy 3:** Sermon Series (3 to 5 sermons) that will address gun violence. The series will be preached during Gun Violence Awareness Month (June 2020, Ratliff).

Evaluation of Goal 1: 75% will complete a pre- and post-test. (July 2020, Ratliff and Site Team: Gaston/Gaston, Grimes, and Thomas)

Goal #2- Recruit a team from 5 to 7 who will assist me in the developing the curriculum to address gun violence.

- **Strategy #1:** Determine the expertise needed on the team to develop specialties in Youth Ministry or a particular field, such as Educator, Law Enforcement. (July 2020, Ratliff, the Gastons, Grimes, Thomas)
- **Strategy #2:** Make sure team knows and is clear concerning what is expected of them in relation to writing curriculum. (July 2020, Ratliff and Site Team: Gaston/Gaston, Grimes, and Thomas)

Evaluation of Goal 2: Recruit 75% of the team (July 2020, Ratliff and Site Team: Gaston/Gaston, Grimes, Thomas).

Goal #3- The team of 5 to 7 will develop and implement the educational curriculum.

- **Strategy #1** The team will meet monthly to develop the curriculum. (September, October 2020, Ratliff and Site Team: Gaston/Gaston, Grimes, and Thomas)
- **Strategy #2:** Present final piece of curriculum to fellow pastors and clergy within UMBA, and implement curriculum within New Tabernacle Baptist Church. (October 2020, Ratliff, the Gastons, Grimes, Thomas)

Evaluation of Goal 3: The pastors of UMBA will preview the final assessment to determine if at least 75 % are willing to use curriculum in their churches. (October 2020, Ratliff, the Gastons, Grimes, Thomas)

CHAPTER 5 EVALUATION PROCESS

The evaluation process that will be most effective in determining the success of my Demonstration Project, focusing on the awareness of gun violence, writing an educational curriculum on gun violence, and movement towards action on a concerted basis to eradicate gun violence in the community by UMBA pastors/churches and New Tabernacle Baptist Church.

Method 1: Clergy Consultation/Preaching

A clergy consultation will be conducted in June 2020 at New Tabernacle Baptist Church to bring together UMBA clergy and build awareness of gun violence. Out of this awareness, clergy should be moved to do more about the senseless gun violence that occurs in our communities, a move to a form of action. A questionnaire will be distributed to determine their point of interest in what type of action they are willing to take in writing educational ministry pieces that can be used in UMBA churches/nonprofits, future trainings/workshops to learn more about nonprofits/ministries that are doing the work, and/or willingness to address the issue of gun violence from the pulpits in which they preach.

Since June is Gun Violence Awareness month, Reverend Ratliff will conduct a three-part preaching/teaching series on gun violence and the effects it has on the community, violence in relation to God and the Bible, and issues, such as, self-defense. The congregations will be given a questionnaire to determine what they learned, and

evaluate the effectiveness of the sermon. Eighty percent of the congregation will complete questionnaire and return to site-team.

Method 2: Clergy Curriculum Team

A team of 5 to 7 UMBA pastors that have shown interest in writing will be assigned different parts of the curriculum writing piece. This will occur after interviews conducted by the site-team and pastor to determine interests and qualifications at New Tabernacle Baptist Church. Team will be formed by end of June 2020 and given until August 2020 to complete writing pieces. Site-team and pastor will touch base with clergy team in July to determine their progress in writing pieces. The educational ministerial pieces will be formatted and presented to the UMBA pastors and churches at the last session in October 2020.

Method 3: Clergy Training/Workshop And Ministry Curriculum

A training/workshop will be conducted in June 2020 by various nonprofits that are fighting against gun violence in an effort to educate UMBA pastors and to build collaborations. The gun violence ministerial curriculum will be presented and ready for distribution to the UMBA pastors in October 2020 after careful editing and review.

CHAPTER 6 MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES

The Process

The members of the site team dedicated substantial time and energy in joining me in the process of competency assessment. A summary of the Site Team's and my assessment of ministerial competencies is as follows:

Theologian

Reverend Ratliff, as a result of his Baptist foundation, has grown and developed nicely to the doctrines of the faith. Reverend Ratliff has crossed cultural boundaries by creating an annual outreach day which blesses the community which is predominantly of Hispanic origins. Reverend Hiram Ratliff gets as many people as possible involved in this outreach effort which is a blessing to the community.

Preacher

One of the most effective gifts Reverend Ratliff possesses is his preaching ability. Reverend Ratliff's preaching is spirit centered, and he preaches sermons that people can relate to and are relevant to what takes place today. Reverend Ratliff's preaching is indoctrinated within Baptist roots and oftentimes ends with a charismatic retelling of the story with a fiery delivery.

Worship

Reverend Ratliff is able to make worship come alive though not only in his preaching ability but also as a gifted singer who began his journey singing in the choir. Every Sunday Reverend Ratliff engages the congregation in a traditional, contemporary, hymn, or praise and worship song that invokes the presence of God. Reverend Ratliff should continue this type of worship as it is effective.

Reverend Ratliff also works along with the Minister of Music to play a song that parallels the sermon that he has just preached, as this is communicated to the Minister of Music the week before.

Ecumenist

Reverend Ratliff has shared the pulpit and invited preachers of different denominations to preach the Word. Reverend Ratliff has worked with Rabbis, Buddhists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventist to name a few in effecting change within the City of New York. Changes, such as, Pre-K for all, identification cards for undocumented, and rallies for fair wages concerning fast food workers. Reverend Ratliff understands the importance of working not only with government but also with different faiths in an effort to effect positive change within our City.

Religious Educator

Reverend Ratliff has an extensive library of books which he uses for sermon preparation and Bible study. Reverend Ratliff's Bible study is known as the Bible Academy in which he not only uses the Bible but has assigned book readings at times in order to teach and keep things interesting. Reverend Ratliff has used and encourages the reading of different translations of the Bible during study and his preaching.

Counselor

Reverend Ratliff encourages his parishioners during services to set up appointments with him through his secretary, that he is approachable, and his door is always open. Oftentimes, parishioners are seen on Sunday morning without appointment and family crises are dealt with before or after service. Reverend Ratliff is flexible with his counseling hours during the week and should continue to encourage such in order to cut down on some of the traffic and demands of Sunday morning worship.

Pastor/Shepherd

Another strength of Reverend Ratliff is getting new members involved which he encourages from the very beginning. New members after they join are given a Meet and Greet which is an introduction to all the ministries, their leadership, and what they do. This is hosted quarterly by the Deaconess ministry and it is during this time that new members can reflect on what ministry he/she would like to be a part of. Reverend Ratliff also acknowledges when new members join a ministry during his pastoral remarks which helps build their self-esteem and makes them feel connected to the church

Competencies Chosen for Development

1. **Leader:** Candidate motivates others, respects talent and delegates responsibilities, appreciative of jobs well done.

Strategies:

- Complete an online training course on Gun Violence Awareness. (June 2020, Ratliff)

Evaluation: Conduct a workshop with 5 to 10 parishioners for feedback through written evaluation. (Pre/Post-tests, July 2020, Ratliff)

2. **Change Agent:** Candidate involves others in the process of change, and builds coalitions for participation.

Strategies:

- Complete a PowerPoint training. (August 2020, Ratliff)
- Develop a PowerPoint presentation on Gun Violence. (August 2020, Ratliff)
- Link PowerPoint presentation through social media outlets. (August 2020, Ratliff)

Evaluation: Create survey to determine the awareness, application, and action of at least 25 parishioners that preview PowerPoint. (August 2020, Ratliff)

3. **Administrator:** Candidate is able to identify resources and involve others in the decision-making process. Candidate feels the need to develop administrative skills in a more intentional manner.

Strategies:

- Create a bibliography of resources to develop my program management skills. (September 2020, Ratliff)
- Select one to utilize. (September 2020, Ratliff)

Evaluation:

- Request a written evaluation from site-team on the one skill. (September 2020, Grimes, Gaston/Gaston, Thomas)

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A: TIMELINE

Date	Task/Activity	Tools/Necessary	Person Responsible
06/2020	Interview with NYAGV	Correspondence set up place/time	Me
06/2020	Online Gun Violence Course	Set up online course through John Hopkins	Me
06/2020	Clergy Breakfast	Church location, flyers, food	Me, Site-team, Church culinary staff
06/2020	Workshop/Collaboration	Church location, flyers, food	Me, Site-Team. Church culinary, Godsquad
07/2020	Meeting	Church location	Me, Site-Team, and Clergy

APPENDIX B: BUDGET

Expense	Cost
Clergy Breakfast/Flyers	\$500.00
Gun Violence online training	\$45.00
Workshop/Flyers	\$200.00
Power point Training	\$100.00
Sermon Series/ Gun Violence Awareness	\$150.00
Books, articles, and miscellaneous	\$500.00
Total:	\$1495.00

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Appendix B: New Tabernacle Baptist Church, Inc. Logo



Figure 1: Church Logo

Appendix C: Partnering with NYTS



Figure 2 Pastor Ratliff partnering with Dr. Adriane Hill and New York Theological Seminary at one of Church's Outreaches

**Thank You New York Theological Seminary
I couldn't have done this without YOU!!!**

Appendix D: Pictures



Figure 3: Pastor Hiram Ratliff on March 25, 2012 on the Anniversary of the Trayvon Martin shooting in Sanford, Florida



Figure 4: The NBA Meets NTBC. Pictured Pastor and Leading Lady Ratliff with former NBA Players Tyrone Grant and Frantz Pierre Louis who addressed youth and young adults at New Tabernacle Baptist Church.



Figure 5 Pastor Ratliff and Clergy from Bethel Gospel Assembly rally against gun violence. Pastor Ratliff sporting a NY Mets cap and orange t-shirt that says, "Save Children, Not Guns!"



Figure 6: Pastor Hiram Ratliff pictured with Mr. Dominic Carter News Anchor/Author who addressed Youth and Young Adult Ministry.



Figure 7: Pastor and Lady Maria Ratliff celebrating the Youth who graduated and were promoted with Academic Excellence Awards.



Figure 8: Pastor Ratliff and Site-team from left to right Deaconess Maryann Thomas, Sister Arque Grimes, Deaconess Gloria Gaston and Deacon Jerime Gaston photo shoot The Sword Not The Gun.



Figure 9: Pastor Ratliff sporting mask and t- shirt the Sword Not The Gun, Ephesians 6:17

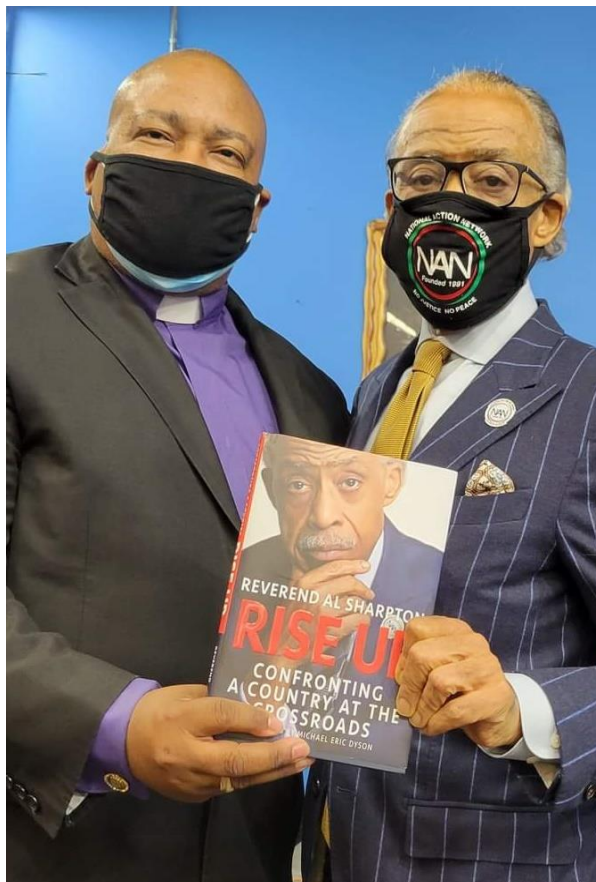


Figure 10: Rev. Ratliff with Al Sharpton

Appendix E: Flyers and Announcements

NEW TABERNACLE BAPTIST CHURCH
990 East 181 Street @ Rev. James B. Staggers Place, Bronx, NY ☎ (718) 367-9882
Reverend Hiram Ratliff, Senior Pastor

Free!

cordially invite you to their

Youth & Young Adult Workshop

Sunday, January 29, 2012 @ 2 pm

“Check Urself B4 U Wreck Urself”

**“It’s time to get
Passionate about
LIFE”**
John 10:10

GUEST SPEAKER

Frantz Pierre-Louis, Jr.
Wagner Seahawks
NBA Boston Celtics

Brother Fred Dorch
Facilitator

GUEST SPEAKER

Tyrone Grant
St. John’s Red Storm
NBA New Orleans Hornets


Figure 11: Flyer that was advertised in the Bronx Times for Youth and Young Adult Workshop with former NBA players on January 29th, 2012.

KINGDOM DESTINY FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL


SOCIAL JUSTICE PRESENTS:

Decreasing Gun Violence in 2021


OUR SPEAKERS:




Bishop
International
Presiding Bishop




Dr. Lorin Russell
Guest Speaker




Rev. H. Ratliff
Guest Speaker



Pastor
Gilford Monroe
Guest Speaker



Superintendent
Jay A Gooding SR.
Guest Speaker



Rev. Gail
Richardson
Regional Director
Social Justice

Saturday 6:00 PM CST
April 3, 2021

Zoom Meeting:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86996578598>


 Bishop Von Smith
KDFI Social Justice

Figure 12: Announcement for Kingdom Destiny Fellowship International

Reverend Hiram Ratliff
Cell: (646) 206-3257 • E-Mail: PreacherHR@aol.com
Senior Pastor of New Tabernacle Baptist Church, Bronx, NY
Doctoral Student of New York Theological Seminary, NYC
has partnered with

The GodSquad - 67th Clergy Council
To end gun violence in America through faith-based partnerships and street-level engagement.
calling All Clergy to Attend
Mark your calendars for a **FREE** presentation
Wednesday, July 1, 2020 @ 1:00 pm
RSVP to <https://bit.ly/2GRUjBr>

This summit will cover:

- The work of gun violence prevention
- An in-depth look at best practices from around the country
- And so much more...

Special Invitation to the Clergy of:

- United Missionary Baptist Association
- Baptist Ministers Evening Conference
- Baptist Ministers Conference of NY & Vicinity

Figure 13: Announcement of 67th Clergy Council

**The Baptist Ministers Evening Conference
of Greater New York & Vicinity, Inc.**
Reverend Dr. Helen C. Wingate, President
Reverend Willie Spencer, 1st Vice President ♦ Reverend Hiram Ratliff, 2nd Vice President

Gun Violence Awareness Summit
for the
Clergy & All Concerned
on
Monday, July 19, 2021 @ 8pm

Panelists:

Pastor Jay A. Gooding, Sr.
Jacobi Stand Up to Violence

Pastor Gilford T. Monroe
The GodSquad

Elder Alfonso Wyatt
Cure Violence



Zoom Information:
Meeting ID: 345 754 6663 ♦ Passcode: BMEC1788

Dial-in Using Home or Cell Phone:
Dial-in: (646) 558-8656 ♦ Meeting ID: 345 754 6663#

Reverend Hiram Ratliff, Moderator

Figure 14: Announcement for Gun Awareness Summit

Appendix F: For Such A Time as This:
A Clarion Call to Clergy

A Clarion Call to Clergy
By Reverend Hiram Ratliff

This section of the action dissertation is entitled “A Clarion Call to Clergy” as the Bible clearly speaks to the believers that “faith without works or actions is dead” (KJV James 2:17). I reached out to my fellow Clergy and one parishioner to assist in writing this piece to address Gun Violence Reform in an effort to curb the day to day violence in which we all face in our communities. It is my hopeful intentions that this piece will motivate pastors and fellow clergy to action that will build ministries both inside and outside their church walls. “A Clarion Call To Clergy” will give those that read it and are interested in developing ministries a place to start, such as how to promote and sponsor a Gun Buyback day, information to create workshops for the youth that will address legal issues, social media, and a successful future, how to work with law enforcement and collaborate with other nonprofits that are making a difference in the communities in which they serve, what to say and how to counsel a family that experiences the traumas that are brought by gun violence, and how the church can and must be the healing agent, the balm in Gilead to address the pain but also offering another solution to this pandemic that claims thousands of people a year.

Now I will begin and offer some of my expertise in the three areas which this dissertation addresses. First **awareness**, I encourage my colleagues in the ministry to take the free course offered through Johns Hopkins: Reducing Gun Violence in America: Evidence for Change (<https://www.coursera.org>). The course will enlighten and educate clergy or anyone else concerned about the systemic evil of gun violence, offer statistics,

and solutions that plague America. Secondly **assessment**, there is a dire need for clergy to assess whether or not the churches they pastor are doing anything or enough to address the violence that occurs outside the four doors of their edifices. Where are the areas in need of improving, such as programs for youth, counseling for families that have lost loved ones to gun violence, collaborations with nonprofits that are doing the work to help curb gun violence, and sermons that will bring forth awareness and empower leadership to action? I have had the unfortunate opportunity to have to eulogize two young people from the community that attended the church and although the sermon might have been moving, we had nothing in place to offer these families after the fact. Lastly, the call to **action** by putting things in place that will prevent, address the traumas, and implement changes brought about by gun violence and its effects on the communities in which we serve.

I was fortunate to have had an NYPD officer who is now a detective contribute to the writing in this section who chose to remain anonymous due to holding his present position. However, he conducted workshops for the church that addressed topics as to what one should do if stopped by a police officer in which one feels disrespected, the dangers of what one shares on social media, and the gangs in which youth find themselves gravitating to. This is just one example of how the church can be moved to action and by no means is this the only response to such a complex community concern. It was the prophet Isaiah in the 6th chapter that heard the voice of the Lord calling and questioning, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I, Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8 NIV) We must answer this same clarion call today!

Gun Violence in New York City
By Rev. J. Loren Russell. BA, MDiv

Anyone who lives in the metropolitan area of New York City recognizes the surge in gun violence, particularly in the last year. The increase is not isolated to a specific borough or community. The surge has been citywide. While it may not be necessary to quote the statistics, we must recognize that this increase has affected, in a disproportionate way, communities of color and where poverty is prevalent. The number of deaths caused by that increase has only aggravated the suffering that has resulted from the number of people who have died from the pandemic known as COVID19. The numbers of people who have died from that virus has likewise been greater in communities of color and poverty.

The increase in gun violence is not happening in New York City alone. An August 8 article in *The Wall Street Journal* reported that other major cities throughout the United States — Philadelphia, Chicago, Miami, San Diego, Omaha, Tulsa, and Jacksonville — have all experienced significant spikes in gun violence.⁴⁵ It is beyond the scope of this document to speak about any of those cities. It just needs to be acknowledged that gun violence has had significant increases across the nation. Our focus is on New York City gun violence, whose statistics are available publicly through the New York City Police Department's CompStat reports. From August 30, 2019-August 30, 2020, citywide statistics of shootings, murders and victims were as follows:⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Jon Hilsenrath, "Homicide Spike Hits Most Large U.S. Cities," August 2, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/homicide-spike-cities-chicago-newyork-detroit-us-crime-police-lockdown-coronavirus-protests-11596395181>.

⁴⁶ NYPD ComStat 2.0, August 30, 2019-August 30, 2020, <https://compstat.nypdonline.org/2e5c3f4b-85c1-4635-83c6-22b27fe7c75c/view/89> (accessed February 4, 2022).

- Shootings
 - 2019: 558
 - 2020: 1070 (+91.76%)
- Murder
 - 2019: 226
 - 2020: 310 (+37.17%)
- Victims
 - 2019: 655
 - 2020: 1319 (+101.37%)

Annualizing these statistics for calendar year 2019, we note that there were 776 shootings, 318 murders, and 922 victims.

What's clear is that we are considerably higher in every area of gun violence in 2020 than we were in 2019. Every day we read or hear about another shooting or killing that happened somewhere in our city. Many times, there are multiple shootings and multiple victims. The sobering reality is that we have averaged 38.75 murders by gun violence per month in 2020. If that trend continues, we will have experienced 465 murders by December 31, 2020. That is a massive 48.6% more people dying from gun violence in 2020 than in 2019.

It needs to be noted that the consensus among law enforcement is that most of the gun violence is being perpetrated by gangs, crews, cliques, or whatever name they may go by. The average age of the shooter is between 16-28 years of age and most are male. If they are convicted, they will spend the best part of, if not the rest of their lives *enslaved*, as defined by the 13th Amendment, by the criminal justice system. To make things worse, every time there is a shooting, the possibility of another waits around the corner or just minutes away as the victim or their "colleagues" seek retaliation.

Statistics tell the story in numbers, but ministry tells the story personally, emotionally, and spiritually. Personally, everyone suffers because of gun violence. Victims of gun violence, every family member of someone who was involved in gun violence, every person who initiated gun violence, and every family member of someone who initiated gun violence and charged by law enforcement, all suffer as a result. Victims of gun violence often die. If they live, they might suffer debilitating injuries, be physically scarred, and forced to figure out a way to live with the psychological trauma that is intrinsically attached to every act of gun violence. Family members are left to bury loved ones or seeing to their physical well-being. I need to mention the need to deal with the psychological damage that is unique to family members of gun violence. If the suspect is convicted, their families are pressed to live with the fact that their lives are going to be disrupted and stressed as long as the incarceration lasts, and many times well beyond release. Perpetrators are not exempt. Unless they are completely and totally socially immoral, they must live with the fact that they killed or severely injured another human being. For someone who is a faith practitioner, there are spiritual concerns that have eternal consequences they must also wrestle with.

As previously mentioned, poverty is a major factor in the upsurge in gun violence. The lack of access to living wage jobs, quality education, adequate healthcare and healthy food is critically important to reducing stress that can easily lead to increased incidents of gun violence within communities where these services are in short supply.

As I look at the statistics and the people who are adversely impacted by this drastic increase of gun violence, I am forced to admit that there is no clear or definitive solution. Fear grips the heart of many, especially the most vulnerable of our society, our

youth, and our seniors. Yet, in the same way that we have no cure for COVID19, we have discovered that wearing masks and socially distancing ourselves helps to minimize the spread of the virus. In like manner, there are probable courses of action that can, and do help to reduce gun violence.

I have personally become a participant in an initiative designed to reach those most likely to be victims, or perpetrators of violence. I am referring to a truly collaborative approach to law enforcement created at John Jay College, initiated in many cities throughout the United States and adopted by the NYPD. The initiative is called NYC Ceasefire. My assessment is strictly from my civilian perspective and is based solely on my observations and interpretation. Ceasefire is a combined approach of law enforcement that includes the NYPD, NY sheriffs, Federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents (ATF), city, state and federal departments of corrections, local District Attorneys, US Attorneys, community-based organizations and, of course clergy. It is intended to meet directly with those who are most likely to be perpetrators or victims of gun violence, as well as their friends and sometimes their families. The goal and the message are to keep them alive, safe, and out of prison.

My contribution in this collaborative effort has given me the opportunity to personally visit and meet directly with more than 500 individuals and their families. Alongside members of the NYPD, sheriffs, and ATF agents, we talk directly to and share the message, the consequences for continued violence, and, most importantly, the resources that have been made available to them. To be more specific, each of the above-mentioned agencies will use every legal and available ordinance at their disposal to ensure that the people in our communities are safe and free of gun violence. This means

that there will be concerted effort by each of these law enforcement agencies to apply all the laws available to them to fulfill the goal of the Ceasefire initiative, which will keep the community safe. Let me mention that this collaborative effort has produced an unexpected result. Law enforcement officers are seeing, through the participation of civilians and clergy, alternative ways of addressing situations and people in our community. Couple that with the cooperative effort of our community-based organizations who provide whatever resources are needed by the recipient, and you create the possibility of reducing, if not eliminating gun violence from our communities. The services include but are not limited to, education, jobs and job training, OSHA certifications, relocation, and social services. I like to say, “even if you have baby-mama drama,” Ceasefire can help.

There has been trust issues getting the recipients to take advantage of the services, but the effort and the intent is genuine with no strings attached. The process of communication is clear; tell them what the consequences of continued gun violence will be, the resources that have been made available, and they will, hopefully, choose the resources that will help them to stay alive, safe and out of prison.

While participation is not mandatory, if any recipient decides to take advantage of the resources and/or the services made available through Ceasefire, they can avoid the consequences of ongoing participation in gun violence. Because the negative consequences to families are real, the resources and services have also been made available to them as well.

Ceasefire is one approach to reduce gun violence. But there are many other programs, services, and ways to join the effort to reduce and help eliminate gun violence

in our communities. It does not matter whether you are from one of the hard-hit communities, you can be a part of our collective responsibility to keep our communities safe and our people alive and out of prison. Someone might say, “All that sounds good, but what can I do?” It could be as simple as talking to your own children or grandchildren. Gun violence is a community problem that the collective community needs to help resolve from whatever position they happen to occupy. The reality is, “Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something. If everyone would do something, then everything will get done.”

Gun Buyback Program
By Pastor Jay A. Gooding

What is the role of a pastor/clergy in the urban community during these troubled times? First clergy must build a relationship within their communities. This includes community groups, law enforcement, and their elected officials. This is done by becoming active in community meetings, such as police community council meetings, community board meetings, neighborhood associations meetings and clergy group meetings. The more visible you are in quiet times, the more recognizable you become in adverse times. Not only for law enforcement, but primarily for the community. It is most significant that the young man standing on the street corner as well as the police chief know who you are. BE A VISUAL VOICE.

As the director for community outreach for Jacobi Hospital and the “Stand Up to Violence,” my role is to help in the reduction of gun violence in our communities, whether through presentations at community meetings or community rallies when there’s a shooting in the community. In the case of a shooting in the community, I’m able to gather the clergy, elected officials, community leaders and residents to make a presence together. Prior to the pandemic our Jacobi SUV program had seen a reduction in gun violence by 57% in our target areas. I have had the opportunity to host two (2) “Gun buyback events” at both of our houses of worship, by building a partnership with the district attorney of Bronx County. We hosted the initial Bronx “gun buyback” in 2009 under the auspices of then Bronx DA Robert Johnson at our church located in the Highbridge section of the Bronx. In 2016, our Williamsbridge location hosted an event with newly elected Bronx DA Darcel Clark. Gun buybacks are sponsored in conjunction with NYPD and the District Attorney’s office. Depending upon the area of the Borough

where they're looking to host the event, houses of worship are chosen. When houses of worship are chosen, there are certain approved NYPD qualifications they must have, and their security checked in advance. First, they need to have at least two (2) egresses. One door for the person to come in with the gun, and another to exit. Second the house of worship needs to have a separate and secure spot where NYPD receives and does a safety check on the firearm to dislodge any bullets that may be in the chamber. The person who brings in the firearm waits for the gun to be processed. There are no questions asked as to where or how they possessed the firearm, and the person is anonymous. That person waits while a \$200 debit card is distributed to them. This money is usually sponsored by the District Attorney office. If a BB gun is processed, there is a \$25 donation.

Rev. Dr. Gloria Bradshaw

The church of God has throughout history taken a leading role in the community. Always leading during a crisis to bring spiritual guidance to help people understand the use of spiritual critical thinking and apply the practical application of God's love to their problems. Through the word of God, they are encouraged that God will bring them through. It is at this point the community and church bring common options to the table. The weapon of choice should be the sword of God. The word of God speaks a new agenda to a common enemy out of the mouths of a faithful people. This weapon of choice will take us out of a violent situation, and yet it can still defend and protect us and our family. This is helping the community to know that there are other choices to solve a potential violent episode in one's life.

The church has a responsibility as we look at the growing occurrence of violence in our society and communities, an alarming, increasing number of shootings that have brought us all to fear. The criminal mind seems to have possessed the youth as well as the adults, committing robberies and gang related violence. Is this because of the current circumstances we are now living with the Corvid19? Many of us are now faced with choices of how to handle our anxiety, stress, hardships, and grief. The normal daily choices we must make for our families make it increasingly difficult for people to separate themselves from their emotions and reach out for spiritual guidance in their lives. This is where the churches take the leading role, bringing calm and peace to their communities.

There is hope when we redirect the purpose of living in fear and strengthen it with faith to survive. The total numbers of deaths by guns are at a high from last year. Almost twenty-four percent higher than 2019. According to the NYPD Citywide Crime Statistics

for the month of August 2020, there was a 166% increase in the number of shooting incidents across the city (242 v. 91) as the number of shootings rose in all boroughs except Staten Island. We are also experiencing a high rate of crimes committed by guns throughout the country. The pandemic, unfortunately, has contributed to the onset of an unsteady mental state of people recovering from sickness and grief for so many have lost loved ones. Although we try to understand and contemplate the reasons why the use of guns in this country has caused so much violence and grief within our communities, the right to bear arms does not give anyone the right to kill innocent bystanders and children.

I believe that if we could visualize from a non-violent perspective, we could see the word of God being the weapon to be used as a line of defense. God's words have power. If we let words of the sword be our weapon, guns would be used for their original purpose in defense and acquisition of food. Humanity has battled with the emotional problem of anger as its attachment to hurt. Since creation, anger is displayed defensively, in aggression and violence. It was the jealousy of Cain that caused him to sin, that followed humanity into the first murder. Our human nature has free will giving us the freedom to maintain our devotion and dedication to God or disobey God. The church would encounter difficulty and adversity along this journey.

I know that there are times when our faith is tested; when we will encounter situations that test our resolve to live committed lives to Jesus. It is during these trying times, we must continue to portray a positive Christian witness. Our testimony is the greatest tool we have in reaching out to others for Christ. We must continually display a Christian witness; it is not our time to be quiet, but to lift our voices if we are to be effective in reaching those apart from Christ. It can be difficult to understand, and it can

be difficult to put into daily practice. However, I believe if we continue to discuss the virtues of how to and allow God, through Jesus Christ, to guide every believer we could possess and portray a way to resolve this matter of gun violence and not let it control us.

Let us consider Paul. In Ephesians 6:17 NIV, he says, “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” In this portion of scripture Paul, paints a picture of a soldier with armor. The sword symbolizes power, protection, authority, strength, and courage of the bearer of the arms. However, he wanted us to understand that the helmet of salvation is being described to let us know what we should be putting into our heads to shield us from evil and cover us with God’s saving power and having the weapon of God’s word with us. To have a spiritual line of defense that is not physical by using our mouths filled with the word. The power of the spiritual sword in Hebrews 4:12: “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints, and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

I believe that if the church prepares a practical line of defense by using continuous communication to the community through the word of God for gun awareness, we could see a transformation within our communities. 1) With God’s Love....I have found that when the church presents a program of teaching love to the congregation and brings that message of how to love to the community; it secures a welcoming approach for a dialog to begin. John 3:16 16 KJV, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It is through God’s love we are to learn how to treat one another. John 15: 12-13, “This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man

than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” The sword in our hand can bring the community together by putting everyone on the same level without any differences. It is when we are aware of our surroundings that we can learn to love the people who live with us. 2) With God’s Promise of Spiritual Defense.... Isaiah 54:17 KJV, “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord.” 3) With Self Awareness Galatians 5:22-23 NIV, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” Finally, with the Power of Prayer..... James 5:16, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” Our prayers are the available power given to us through the Holy Spirit to openly communicate with God. Luke 11:2-4 2, “And he said unto them, when ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in 4 heavens, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.” It is the power of our oneness that can change the outcome of legislation, politics, and civil unrest. The movement of prayer and intercession interjects a positive vision.

What to Say, When You Don't Know What to Say?
By Reverend Dundee Holt

My first funeral as a newly ordained minister, at the age of 25, was for a family of five killed in a drug-related, gangland shooting. This was certainly no setting for the standard niceties of “they are in a better place,” “the Lord knows best,” “we’ll understand it better by and by,” or “God has a reason for everything.” The occasion called for confronting the reality of evil and providing comfort to those left alive to suffer its effects. Police were present, as there was the possibility that people involved in the killing would attend the service. As this was nearly 40 years ago, I don’t remember what I said, only that the predominantly unchurched West Indian audience stared at me and didn’t respond much.

What do you say to people who have lost loved ones to violence; who have suffered what Africans call “bad death”? What do you say to people who don’t relate to Christian language, symbols or doctrine? What do you say to people who are sad and angry? Empathy. Start where they are and be honest about your own sadness and anger. As a Black man in America, I am angry a lot. I am angry at the racism that my people have to confront daily. I am angry about the systems put in place that deny us access to the rights and privileges that whites have. I am angry that beautiful, talented Black people who bear the image of God are devalued and their humanity diminished. I am angry that systems and forces put us in places and spaces injurious to our health and well-being. As Christians, we are to die daily. As Black people, we are killed daily. Sometimes slowly, softly, subtly, but certainly. Limited access to health care, quality education and wealth kill us. Environmental racism kills us. Drugs deliberately shipped into our communities kill us. Stereotypes that dehumanize us provide license for others to kill us. The tension,

frustration, fear, and aggravation of having to constantly navigate white spaces builds up in us, killing us or moving us into places to be killed. In preaching to survivors of those victimized by violent death, we need to remember and remind those who hear us that, as we all bear the image of God, each of us is precious. There is no amount of sin that can erase that which God has placed in us. The person killed violently was important to someone. They were someone's son or daughter, brother or sister, husband or wife, mother, father or friend. Focus on the intrinsic value of the person killed. The fact that the person has been taken away is reason to be angry. The good news is that we can take that anger, and everything else that we are feeling, to the Lord.

Sermons that comfort the family coming from the Psalms, such as the Psalm 23 or promote action coming from the Gospels, such as Jesus' mission statement in Luke 4:18, and invoke the Church to action, such as Paul's letter to the Ephesians 6:10-18. People need to know that God still cares in such traumatic times, that the church is present, and that a move of action is necessary to curb the gun violence that occurs within the community. These scriptures are a good place to start when delivering sermons and/or eulogies that will not only bring comfort but hopefully provoke the hearers of the Word to actions from the church and beyond.

“Check Yourself Before You Wreck Yourself 2021”
By A Concerned African American NYPD Detective

The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution officially abolished and continues to prohibit slavery and involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime. **FELONY CHARGE:** 1. A felony charge CANNOT be removed from your record EVER! 2. This F will have people judge you. 3. This F limits the type of jobs you can apply for. 4. This F can prevent you from residency. 5. This F can mess your life up for making one bad **CHOICE**. **A CONVICT IS EQUIVALENT TO A SLAVE:** 1. Work for free or below minimal wage. 2. Instructed when you can wake or sleep. 3. Unhealthy food .4. Trying to escape can result in death.

HOW TO HANDLE YOURSELF WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT: 1. Speak loud & clear 2. Keep your hands out your pockets 3. Don't make a scene to excite others. 4. Always look at badges, vehicles and collar brass numbers. 5. Avoid the attitudes. 6. Have proper identification. **GANGS: WHY DO PEOPLE JOIN GANGS?** 1. No FATHER present. 2. Protection. 3. Born into the lifestyle. 4. Today's music. 5. No family/ feel alone. **GANG ASSOCIATED ACTIVITY:** 1. Male/female jumped in for membership 2. Females roll dice and sleep with the number of members the dice falls on. 2. Their criminal activity or beef is inherited. 3. Once you join a gang, you can be charged as a gang. **COLLEGE:** 1. College is not an option anymore. **YOU MUST ATTEND!** 2. Having your masters is a MUST. The competition only gets harder so compete with the advantage. 3. You must visit a college campus. The access to information and independence is unexplainable. 4. Going away to college shows you how to work with other cultures, responsibility, and prepares you for the real world. 5. The

friends you meet in college are forever. 6. College is the place where you **NETWORK NETWORK NETWORK!**

Parents: 1. Ensure your kids can talk to you comfortably about tough topics such as: sex, drugs, insecurities, relationships, etc. 2. Take your kids out of the inner city (restaurants for social skills, colleges, camping, etc.) 3. Run your household where your kids are not afraid to face this cruel world. (Personal experiences are how kids learn.) 4. Stop telling your kids to read a book when they are irritating you. It makes them not want to read and look at reading as a punishment. Things you never do on Facebook, Instagram, Tic Tok, YouTube, etc. 1. Posting explicit pictures. 2. Expose personal information (address, social security number, bank info). 3. Foul language. 4. Negative activities (crimes). Invest: 1. Teach your kids to invest in themselves (Buy Stocks). 2. Create a debit/savings account and teach finances. 3. College fund.

Appendix G: Buyback News Stories

DAILY NEWS

NYPD and Bronx DA take 165 guns off streets with buyback program⁴⁷



Pastor Jay Gooding and Bronx DA Darcel Clark helped collect 99 guns at the Fellowship Tabernacle of Praise church on E. Gun Hill Road in Laconia.

The Bronx is a little lighter on re power after the NYPD netted 165 guns in buybacks at two churches on Saturday.

Cops and Bronx District Attorney Darcel Clark's office offered a \$200 bank card for working handguns and assault rifles and a \$25 card for rifles and shotguns turned in at the Fellowship Tabernacle Church of God in Christ on E. Gun Hill Road in Laconia and the Evangelical Garifuna Church on Brook Ave. in Mott Haven. They employed a no questions-asked policy.

⁴⁷ Joseph Stepansky, "NYPD and Bronx DA Take 165 Guns off Streets with Buyback Program," *New York Daily News*, 07 August 2016 (accessed January 22, 2022).

Clark's office, which hosted the event, said 99 of the rearms were traded in at the Fellowship Tabernacle church. Another 66 rearms were turned in at Evangelical Garifuna Church. In total, the city took 61 revolvers, 52 semi-automatics, three assault rifles, 12 rifles, 10 shotguns, 27 BB guns, air pistols, starter pistols off the street.



NYPD netted 165 guns in buybacks at two churches after offering a \$200 bank card for working handguns and assault rifles and a \$25 card for rifles and shotguns. (NYPD 44th Precinct via Twitter)

"We are very pleased that we got so many handguns," said DA Clark. "Each of these guns represents a life saved in the Bronx." Shooting incidents are down 19.3% citywide compared to the same time period last year, with 531 shootings through July 31, compared to 662 in 2015.

Beating Guns Into Coat Hangers⁴⁸

With three churches participating in the Police Department's latest gun buyback program in the Bronx, there was plenty of opportunity for the police commissioner, **Raymond W. Kelly**, to make biblical references.

Dozens of weapons were arrayed on tables in front of Mr. Kelly at a news conference at Police Headquarters when he announced the results of last Saturday's event, in which 987 weapons were dropped off at the churches in six hours — the largest number of guns turned in since the department started the program last year.

Eventually, that sawed-off shotgun, that shiny handgun that assault weapon could one day be hanging in a closet. The weapons will be melted down into wire clothes hangers, Mr. Kelly said.

"You might say we are beating our swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks and handguns into hangers," Mr. Kelly said.

Pastors from three churches: **New Gospel Temple Church of God in Christ**; the **Miracle Revival Temple** and the **Community Protestant Church**, took part in the Bronx buyback and were with Mr. Kelly at the news conference. And although their representatives did not attend, the Police Department said in a statement later in the afternoon that three additional churches in the Bronx had taken part in the buyback as well.

"The Bible tells us that wisdom is better than weapons," Mr. Kelly said. The way it works is simple: Anyone who has a gun can take it to one of the designated churches on gun buyback day and receive a \$200 prepaid cash card in return. No questions asked.

The department started the program as a way to help get weapons off the streets. Guns may also be turned in at police precinct houses at any time for \$100.

"Since we began in July 2008, we have netted 4,538 guns in seven one-day events," Mr. Kelly said. That is almost as many as the department has collected over the last seven years in the program at precinct houses, he said.

Part of the program's success has to do with people feeling more free to drop off a gun at a church. Even so, some send surrogates to do it, Mr. Kelly said.

There are occasional surprises. In Tremont on Saturday, someone brought in a souvenir hand grenade found in a garage that was being cleaned out. The Police Department's bomb squad was called in to dispose of it.

"So that kind of slowed down the action a little bit at that location," Mr. Kelly said.

It is difficult to say how many of the weapons were unlicensed, Mr. Kelly said, and to substantiate how the program directly affects homicide rates, which he said were at record lows so far this year.

"The lives that we are protecting by taking these guns off the street are priceless in comparison to the cost in dollars that we spent," said the Bronx district attorney, **Robert T. Johnson**, who was at the news conference.

⁴⁸ Richard Hauser, "Beating Guns into Coat Hangers," *The New York Times* 27 April 2021, <https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/29/beating-handguns-into-coat-hangers>.

Appendix H: Clergy Assessment Survey

1. Does the church where you Pastor or worship have anything in place to address Gun Violence? (**Check all that apply**)

_____ Youth Workshops

_____ Counseling for families (Individual, Family, and/or Group)

_____ Collaborations (Nonprofits that are geared specifically to Gun Violence, Local precincts, politicians that are fighting for reform, churches)

_____ Sermons/Teaching Series that address the topic (Gun Violence Awareness month every June)

_____ Gun Buyback Day

_____ Other (specifically _____)

_____ None of the above

2. What are you willing to do or implement in your church to address the Gun Violence in the community? (**Check all that apply**)

_____ Take a free Gun Violence Awareness Course (Johns Hopkins)

_____ Sermons/Teaching Series

_____ Counseling (Individual, Family and/or Group)

_____ Youth Workshops

_____ Gun Buyback Day

_____ Collaborations (Nonprofits/local precincts, politicians, other churches)

_____ Other (specifically _____)

_____ None of the above

Clergy's Name: _____

Church Affiliation: _____

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